The Alternate Adventures of the Power Ponies

By: DisneyFanatic2364

A series of one-shots set in an alternate world where the Mane 6 are the Power Ponies. Follow the adventures of six superheroes and their dragon sidekick as they defend Maretropolis from dastardly evil-doers, including the Mane-iac, the Equalizer, the Phoenix, and the God of Chaos himself.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2016-12-03

Updated: 2018-09-28

Words: 216417

Chapters: 32

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Drama - Characters: Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Spike, The Mane-iac - Reviews: 425 - Favs: 157 - Follows: 137

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12258113/1/The-Alternate-Adventures-of-the-Power-Ponies

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

The Alternate Adventures of the Power Ponies

Introduction
Origins: Part 1
Origins: Part 2
Origins: Part 3
Origins: Part 4
Origins: Part 5
Origins: Part 6
The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 1
The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 2
The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 3
The Shadow King: Part 1
The Shadow King: Part 2
The Shadow King: Part 3
The Sirens' Song: Part 1
The Sirens' Song: Part 2
The Sirens' Song: Part 3
Heart of Stone: Prologue
Heart of Stone: Part 1
Heart of Stone: Part 2
Heart of Stone: Part 3
Heart of Stone: Part 4
Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 1
Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 2
Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 3
Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 4
Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 1
Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 2

Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 3
The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 1
The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 2
The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 3
The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 4
Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

Origins: Part 1

I should be working on my final projects for college, but it's been so long since I've written fanfiction. I didn't want to start this until after "CMC: Next Generation" was done, but I've been wanting to do this for over a year now and my fingers were just itching to type.

I've been wanting to combine the world of ponies with my love for superheroes. Unfortunately, I was deprived of superhero comics in my childhood, but I loved watching shows and movies with Spiderman, Batman, the Justice League. So I wanted to do more with the Power Ponies universe Hasbro had created, but never really expanded upon except in the special annual comic, but I actually liked the hero designs better when they were the Mane 6. So this will be an alternate world where the Mane 6 ARE the Power Ponies, and there will be some other canon characters from the show as well, along with the Mane-iac and maybe some other Power Ponies villains from the comic. You might see inspiration from familiar superhero franchises, like the ones I listed above.

This is going to be a one-shot series like the "CMC" fic, so don't expect updates to be as frequent as multi-chapter fics. There are, however, going to be some multi-parters, like this one.

DISCLAIMER: I do not own "My Little Pony" or the "Power Ponies."

"A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."

- Christopher Reeve

Two pegasus mares were making their way down a long, underground stone corridor. Both wore pith helmets and green polo shirts, the uniforms of explorers. The mare up front had a tan coat and a black mane streaked with gray. Over her shoulders, crossing each other over her chest, she carried a burlap satchel and a rope. The flames of the torch glinted in her violet red eyes, which were narrowed in concentration, and highlighted her firm jaw. She kept one wing along the stone wall as she held the torch high and squinted into the darkness.

The second mare staggered behind the first, for she had a heavier load: a tall knapsack nearly twice her size. Shovels and pitchforks stuck out of the flaps and an extra rope dangled on the side. Even though the bag was strapped around her belly, every now and then she had to throw her shoulder back to keep it in place.

Her complexion was more vibrant with her cyan coat and wild rainbow hair. Her eyes were the same color as the lead mare's, only concealed behind her thick, black-rimmed glasses.

She cried out as she stumbled over a crack. Her leader whipped around to catch her with her wing.

"Shush!" she hissed. "Watch where you step, Rainbow Dash! This cavern could be lined with booby traps!"

Rainbow Dash panted as she regained her footing. "How can you be so sure of that, Daring?"

Daring rolled her eyes. "It's the entrance to an ancient underground temple. Of *course* there's gonna be booby traps."

She turned around and proceeded down the corridor.

"Just because we set some off in that Arequirtan temple," Rainbow said as she followed her boss, "doesn't mean we'll find any in Grace."

"You mean *you* set some off." Daring glanced back at her. "You need to be more careful."

"Hey, it would be easier if I wasn't carrying Mount Olympus on my

back!"

"And be quiet. This structure is old. The slightest noise could bring the whole place down upon us."

Rainbow snorted. "Fine."

When Rainbow had first been hired by Daring Do two years ago as a research assistant, she had been excited. After all, working alongside the greatest archaeologist in the world meant fame, fortune and awesome adventures, right?

Well, there certainly was a lot of adventure, and being a research assistant paid well, but that's all Rainbow was. An *assistant* . Whenever reporters and writers talked about Daring Do's endeavors, no pony ever mentioned the *assistant* .

When Daring Do had retrieved the Sapphire Statue from the Lost Temple of Anubis, no pony had mentioned the *assistant* who had stopped the arrows that flew from the walls with her enormous knapsack. When Daring had recovered the Rings of Scorchero from the Fortress of Talocan, no pony had mentioned the *assistant* who had helped her lift the final ring off the obelisk, causing the fortress to collapse. When Daring Do had used the Amulet of Culhuacan to find the Seven-Sided Chest of Chicomoztoc, no pony had mentioned the *assistant* who had figured out which door led to the treasure room.

Honestly, Rainbow wouldn't have minded being Daring Do's personal pack mule if she could only have a little recognition every now and then. Or at least a thank you.

"Look!" Daring whispered, holding the torch higher. "There's an antechamber up ahead!"

Rainbow's wings spread out in excitement. "Finally!"

She was prepared to dash towards the exit, but Daring held out her hoof and scowled.

"Right," Rainbow said with a nervous laugh. "Careful. Right."

They moved slowly and quietly. Rainbow watched the ground with every cautious step she made. When they reached the antechamber, they both let out a gasp as torches suddenly ignited with green fire. The room was enormous, with a high ceiling held by ancient Ionic columns. The walls were adorned with painted Gracian amphorae that Rainbow suspected were with filled with treasure. Daring saw her looking their way.

"We can admire the artwork later. Remember what we came for."

She pointed to the far end of the chamber, where a small light was glimmering.

"Is that…?" Rainbow started to say.

Her boss nodded. "Zeus' Lightning Bolt."

Rainbow gaped in awe as they trotted towards it. "Do you think the legends are true? That this is what the sky god Zeus used to make lightning?"

"I don't know about any god, but whoever wielded this artifact could have sparked the myth of Zeus."

Her assistant smirked. "Pun intended?"

Daring rolled her eyes. "Anyway, it's said that this lightning bolt can only be wielded by a worthy hero."

"That's gotta be you, boss. And I'm not just saying that to score schmooze points. I mean who could be a worthier hero than you?"

She smiled. "There's only one way to find out."

They came to a set of marble steps leading up to a cylindrical pedestal where the shining object sat. Rainbow squinted through the brightness and deciphered the tiny shape of a lightning bolt.

"Zeus' Lightning Bolt is a…necklace?"

Daring shrugged. "It would appear so."

"But it's so…tiny."

The artifact was a golden zigzag pendant that looked to be the size of a grown pony's hoof, attached to a thin golden chain. The only thing spectacular about it was its luminosity.

"Don't be fooled by appearances," Daring said as she handed her assistant the torch. "Even the smallest of things can hold the greatest of powers."

The adventurer ascended the steps, treading carefully in case of traps. It was peculiar that they had yet to trigger one on this expedition. She had to shield her eyes as she approached the necklace. Sticking her tongue out to the side, she slowly reached out and touched the pendant.

Daring shrieked and retracted her hoof as a jolt of electricity shot through her.

"Boss, what happened?"

Daring bit her lip. "Um, uh…nothing, I just…maybe we should play it safe."

She opened the flap of her satchel with her wing and took out a handkerchief. She wrapped it carefully around the necklace and replaced it in her bag.

"Can't be too careful," she said, tipping her helmet towards her assistant. "No telling what this thing is capable of."

Rainbow cocked her head. "O…kay? So now that we've got the bolt, do we head back to the surface or grab a few of those jars…?"

"I don't get it," Daring said, looking suspiciously around the room. "This was too easy. You'd think something this powerful would be more heavily guarded, or at least trigger a trap or…"

"Would an ambush suffice?"

The explorers whirled around to spot a tall, blue catlike creature standing in the chamber's entrance. A tiger, a lynx, a black panther

and a leopard growled as they came up behind him. A small white kitten purred at his leg.

"Ahuizotl!" Daring Do exclaimed. "How did you get down here?"

The cat creature cackled. "Finding the way was easy." He held up a pickaxe. "You were littering these things all over the tunnels!"

Daring shot a glare at Rainbow, who chuckled nervously.

"Hey, it's not *my* fault the flap's loose!"

"Zeus' Lightning Bolt, Daring Do," Ahuizotl said as he stalked towards them. "Give it to me, or I will have to sick my friends on you!"

"You want it?" Daring said, gesturing her hoof to herself. "Come get it."

"So be it then."

Bringing his fingers to his lips, Ahuizotl let out a sharp whistle. The carnivorous cats reacted instantly and pounced towards the ponies. Daring flew up and landed in front of Rainbow.

"Get back!"

"But I can…" Rainbow said.

"I've got this!"

Pivoting on her front hooves, Daring kicked up her back legs, making contact with the tiger's face. She jumped up and swung out her foreleg before the panther's jaws could sink into her skin. Rainbow wanted to help, but the burden on her back made it hard to move.

"Get to the exit!" Daring called as she punched the lynx in the jaw.

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine!" She tossed her the satchel. "Catch!"

"Oh boy!" Rainbow said as she threw up her front hooves.

Unfortunately, that was a bad idea, for as soon as her hooves left the ground, the weight of the knapsack pulled her backward to the floor. The satchel flew over her and Rainbow found herself on her back. She flailed her hooves about, but the knapsack had her trapped like an overturned tortoise.

As the satchel landed on the floor, the flap opened and the handkerchief holding the necklace slid out. Ahuizotl gasped when he saw the flash of light peering out of the cloth.

"The lightning bolt!"

He slinked past the fight and towards the bundle. At this moment Daring was under the leopard, whose teeth were dripping with drool.

"Rainbow!" Daring cried as pushed against the feline's chest. "Stop him!"

"I'm trying!" Rainbow said as she attempted to sit up, but the straps were preventing her.

"At last," Ahuizotl said as he picked up the cloth and pulled back its folds.

"No!"

Rainbow used her teeth to tug at the straps.

"The power of Zeus," Ahuizotl said as he pressed his fingertips around the pendant, "is mi—YOW!"

His fur stood on end as the necklace shocked him, forcing him to drop it. By this time, Rainbow had wriggled out of the straps and rolled onto the floor. With a clink, the pendant landed near her hoof. She looked up at Ahuizotl, who had his fingers in his mouth, then at Daring who was bucking the tiger off her back, and then back at the necklace. To Rainbow's amazement, it seemed to glow brighter.

Daring gasped when she saw her assistant reaching for it. "Dash, no!"

But she had already touched it. As she rose to her hooves, the tiny bolt sparked to life. The sparks wrapped around her hoof, snaked up her foreleg and into her mane. The jolt that came was so powerful that it knocked her glasses off and frizzed her mane upwards. What she felt wasn't pain, but like she had just been given a surge of power. The fight momentarily stopped as Daring, Ahuizotl, even the cats stared at the pegasus who was now surrounded by electricity.

Rainbow had no idea what was going on, but as soon as she looked back at the pendant, she felt a sense of purpose, a sense of duty, a sense of…destiny.

Curious as to what would happen, she raised the pendant to the ceiling and a dark cloud formed above her head. Lightning struck at Ahuizotl's paws, making him jump back with a shriek. It then struck at the cats, singeing the panther's tail. The cats hissed and bolted to the exit. Ahuizotl cowardly ran after them, but before he disappeared into the tunnel, he turned back to his foes.

"This isn't over, you…you…whatever your name is! Wielder of Zeus' Power!"

Once he was gone, Rainbow looked up at the storm cloud, which was still blazing with lightning. She lowered the pendant and turned to her boss, whose mouth was agape as she glanced between the pendant and her assistant. Rainbow too looked at the pendant and then back at Daring.

"Well," said the mare encased in lightning. "I guess you could say this whole thing was…shocking."

When thinking of the Power Ponies' origin stories, I took their DC/Marvel counterparts into account. I know Zapp is based off Thor, but as I've never seen or read Thor, I did not have much to go on. However, I did use the idea of ancient mythology, just with Greek instead of Norse.

Puns:

"Arequirtan" = variation of Arequipa, a city in Peru. "Quirt" is a whip used for horses (best pun I could think of)

"Grace/Gracian" = Greece/Grecian, merged with "grade" which is "a horse that has only a small amount of recognizable breeding"

I didn't see much point in changing Zeus' name, or that of Mount Olympus. I can actually imagine these ponies being engaged in ancient mythologies with their sun and moon alicorns and their chaos god.

Origins: Part 2

I just want to clarify that this universe is going to be more technologically advanced than the MLP universe, meaning there will be electricity, cell phones, computers, television, cars (though there will still be the occasional horse cart). It's just easier to have them for the superhero setting.

"Just when I think I have learned the way to live, life changes."

- Hugh Prather

The downtown area of the city of Maretropolis was quiet that night. Since it was Tuesday, most of the citizens had turned in early so they would be awake for work in the morning. Only the street lamps illuminated the sidewalks and the only sound was the trotting of one set of hooves. A lone brown unicorn stallion with blue eyes and a white mane was on his way home from work, a satchel strung across his shoulder. He looked around nervously as he made his way down the dimly lit street.

A *clank* made him jump. He turned to the nearest alleyway and saw a tin can rolling on the ground. A tabby cat mewed as it hopped out of a dumpster. Breathing a sigh of relief, he continued down the street, only to find three figures obstructing his path.

They were just out of the lamp's light, so he could not tell what they were. The figure on the right was large and hunched over, the one on the left was smaller than a pony, and the one in the middle towered over the unicorn, staring down at him with bright green eyes.

"Very sorry," the stallion said, placing his hoof on his chest. "You came out of nowhere."

The tall figure took a long whiff of the air and said in a hissy voice, "What's in the bag?"

The pony gulped as he glanced at his satchel. "Um, nothing much, just…keys and stuff." He tried to walk around them. "Listen, I gotta get home to my daughter."

The large figure moved in front of him.

"I smell," said the hissy voice, which seemed to have a hint of slobber, " *geeeeeeemmmmsssss* ."

The stallion backed away slowly. "I uh…I don't know what you're talking about."

The figures walked into the light, revealing themselves to be large dogs in spiked collars and vests. The pony turned to run.

"Get him!" cried the tall gray one with the hissy voice.

His friends bounded after the stallion. The large one with dull blue fur leaped over him and landed on the other side of the sidewalk, forcing the pony to turn into the alleyway. The little one with brown fur was fast and got close enough to snap at his tail. Crying out at the sudden yank on his tail, the stallion tripped, allowing the large dog to sit on him.

"Good work, boys!" said their leader. "Spot, search his bag!"

The small dog Spot tore the satchel off the stallion, snapping its strap, and dug through it. After tossing out a wallet, a cell phone and house keys, he produced a small diamond ring.

"Diamond!" Spot said, drooling.

"No, that's my wife's!" the stallion screamed as he tried to wriggle out from under the big dog. "Please, it's all I have left of her!"

"Too bad," the large dog said with a snort. "It belongs to the Diamond Dogs now!"

The three of them laughed in triumph. Then the big dog suddenly

became silent and fell backward.

"Fido!" Spot exclaimed.

The leader squinted at the golden horseshoe lying near their comrade's head.

"Rover, Rover, Rover," said a female voice with a country accent.

The two dogs turned to the alley's exit, where an earth mare was leaning against the wall, playfully tossing another golden horseshoe upwards and catching it in her hoof. She wore a red jumpsuit with black cuffs linked with golden apples on her ankles. Strapped around her belly was a black saddle, a golden rope hanging on its side. Her blonde hair peeked out from under her green slips which covered most of her mane and tail. Her green eyes glinted through her black mask as she smirked at the thugs.

"Didn't yerr ma ever teach ya not to take things that don't belong to ya?"

"Mistress Mare-velous!" the stallion in distress called. "Help me!"

Catching her horseshoe, the hero said, "Give the nice stallion back his ring, boys, and I'll go easy on ya."

"Not a chance, Mistress!" the leader, Rover, hissed. "You won't stop us this time!"

At this point, Fido had regained consciousness and was slowly rising to his paws.

"Diamond Dogs!" Rover barked. "Attack!"

Fido and Spot charged for the superhero, who only rolled her eyes in response.

"Alright, learn it the hard way."

Her rope glowed and magically rose from its place on her saddle, instantly circling into a lasso. Mistress Mare-velous lowered onto all four hooves as her lasso twirled in the air. As she thrust her head

forwards, the lasso whipped towards Spot, catching all four of his paws. The rope tightened, causing the small dog to trip and drop the small ring. Fido growled as he pounced at the hero, but she only smiled as she turned around and kicked him in the gut with her back legs, sending him hurtling into the far end of the alley.

The ring bounced at Rover's feet. He grinned as he picked it up.

"Oh no you don't," Mistress Mare-velous said as she brought out two horseshoes.

With expert aim, she flung the horseshoes at Rover. He squealed as they cuffed his wrists, forcing him to release the ring and fly backward. His new cuffs stuck into the wall on either side of his head, trapping him. The stallion levitated his ring and satchel as he stood up.

"Thank you, Mistress!"

"Don't mention it," the hero said with a bow. "Now you make it home safely, okay?"

The stallion nodded and ran out of the alley. Mistress Mare-velous spotted Fido climbing up a fire escape.

"Hey, get back here!"

Using her mouth, she picked up the horseshoe she had used to knock him out earlier and began chasing the dog up the fire escape. Normally, she would've used her rope to snag him, but it was currently binding Spot. Fido cackled as he jumped onto the roof of the building, but then screamed suddenly.

Seeing a flash of blue light, Mare-velous quickened her pace by grabbing the metal balcony above her and swinging over the rail. When she reached the top, she found Fido encased in a block of ice, his eyes and mouth open in fear.

The hero groaned in annoyance as she looked up at the sky. "I thought we agreed I would take the nightshift and you would take the dayshift."

Another superhero flew into view. This one was an alicorn with lavender wings and a wild indigo mane highlighted with purple and pink. Her suit was magenta, accessorized with white boots studded with pink six-pointed stars and accented with pink ribbons. On her neck was a blue metal collar that stretched over her back, the same material as the cover over her horn. Her purple eyes looked at Mistress Mare-velous through a magenta mask and thick bronze goggles.

"Sorry," she said apologetically, "but some of us are busy during the daytime."

Mare-velous scoffed. "The almighty Masked Matter-Horn who can fly *and* do magic is too busy to save the day?"

The Masked Matter-Horn sighed as she lowered onto the roof. "I just helped you with this last thug. A simple thank you might be in order."

"I could've handled him myself." She tapped the ice. "And I didn't need any fancy magic to do it either."

"Isn't your rope magic?"

"Ole Bessie's different. I inherited her from my pa. She's a part of me." She glanced at the Matter-Horn's wings. "I wasn't so unsure of myself that I felt the need to make myself an all-powerful alicorn."

The Matter-Horn sighed as she tucked her wings away. "I didn't come here to steal your thunder or fight over who's the better hero. I came to ask for your help."

"Help? What could ya possibly need my help for?"

She paced around the frozen dog. "An important and very powerful artifact is going to be unveiled at the Maretropolis Museum tomorrow. The archaeologists who retrieved it were attacked on their expedition. The archaeologists managed to escape, but so did the perpetrators."

Mare-velous tapped her hoof impatiently. "What's this gotta do with me?"

The Matter-Horn stopped pacing and turned to her. "We think the ones who attacked the archaeologists might go after the artifact again. While I trust the museum's security system, I think we superheroes should provide extra protection."

The earth mare didn't look interested.

"Here." The alicorn levitated two tickets out from inside her collar. "These are tickets to the exhibit's unveiling tomorrow. Go as your secret identity to avoid suspicion, and bring a friend if you must."

Mare-velous took the tickets for the "Wonders of Ancient Grace" in her hooves. She looked at the Matter-Horn.

"Exactly how powerful is this artifact?"

"It's Zeus' Lightning Bolt."

Mare-velous' eyes widened. "You don't mean… *the* lightning bolt with the power to control the thunder and the lightning and the rain and the hail and all the forces of nature?"

"You've heard of it?"

"Heard of it? My granny told me all those old Gracian stories of how the gods granted the mortals bits of their powers as gifts." She touched the hook where her rope usually hung. "My rope was said to have been given to my ancestor by Demeter, the Goddess of Agriculture herself!"

She paused at the thought of her family heirloom and then shook her head with a laugh. "But really, guardin' the bolt would be a waste of time. Like my rope, gifts of power from the gods can only be wielded by those deemed worthy by the gods. Even if the thieves managed to get to the bolt, they wouldn't be able to use it."

"True," the Matter-Horn said with a nod. "Nevertheless, the bolt could be used for other things. It can be sold on the black market, passed off as something that can be used by any pony. And who's to say its next wielder *won't* be a thief?"

Mare-velous waved her hoof. "The gods would never choose some

pony who would use that power for evil. Believe me." Her expression turned grim. "I should know."

"The bolt is still an ancient artifact and should be protected. Even if its power cannot be used, it could still be lost for another thousand years or so. How would you feel if your rope was stolen and lost forever?"

Mare-velous narrowed her eyes at her and sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll be at the unveiling, but it ain't to help you." She turned to the frozen dog. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've gotta get these goons to the slammer."

"You sure you can haul three heavy dogs to the jail on your own?"

The earth mare snorted as she started pushing the ice. "Yes."

The Matter-Horn stared at her. "There's nothing wrong with asking for a little help, you know? We could make a great team."

"I told ya. I work alone. You just take care of the giant monsters and natural disasters and leave the thugs to me."

"Not to sound territorial, but I *was* protecting this city long before you were. If you didn't want to share the burden, why leave Appleloosa for Maretropolis in the first place?"

Mare-velous paused. "I just…needed a change of scenery, that's all."

The alicorn shrugged. "Okay." She spread out her wings and took to the skies. "See you at the museum."

As she flew off, the other hero called out, "If yerr not gonna wear yerr costume either, how do I know ya won't just leave me there to do all the work?"

"Oh, I'll be there alright!" She smiled to herself. "You can be sure of it."

A few miles outside of Maretropolis was a rock farm, led by an old earth stallion named Igneous Rock. Every day they would mine for various types of rocks, take larger rocks and break them into smaller ones, and occasionally find gems that could be sold on the market. This morning, Igneous addressed his wife and four daughters at the breakfast table after they had finished their rock soup.

"Alright, girls," he said. "Today's Wednesday. You know what that means."

"Delivery day," his daughters said in unison.

His second youngest daughter, a mare with long flat hair and a dull pink coat, had her head down as she said this.

"As you know," Igneous said as he handed out a map to everyone but his eldest, "due to Limestone's sprained hoof, one of you will have to cover her route."

The pink mare's head shot up.

"Maud, I think you should…"

"Can I do it Pa?!" the pink mare asked, raising her hoof ecstatically. "Please, please, please, please, *please* ?!"

"If she really wants to, Pa," said Maud, a gray mare with a dull violet mane and a monotonous voice, "I don't mind."

Igneous sighed. "Pinkamena, we've talked about this. If you want to make deliveries outside of Rockville, you can't…"

"Get distracted, get lost, or dawdle in any way," Pinkamena finished with a smile. "I know, Pa. I can do it."

"You sure? We can't have another late delivery."

"Don't worry, I promise! I'll get those rocks to Maretropolis faster than a dozen milliseconds!"

Back in Maretropolis, in the boardroom of Polomare Fashions, a meeting was being held. The CEO of Polomare Fashions was a pink earth mare with brown eyes and a purple mane curled up in a bun, held in place with a yellow scrunchie. She wore a blue plaid kerchief around her neck along with a bored expression on her face. She turned to her assistant.

"What's next on the agenda, Coco?"

Coco Pommel, a pale yellow mare wearing a flower in her short blue mane, flipped through her clipboard. "Uh…that would be jumpsuits, Miss Polomare. You asked Rarity to make some for the spring line…"

Suri Polomare groaned. "Right. Rarity, give your presentation, okay?"

A white unicorn with blue eyes and a delicately curled purple mane stood and stepped onto the runway in the middle of the boardroom. Clearing her throat, she spoke in a posh accent.

"Jumpsuits. What are they for, you ask? Well, typically they are for sports like skydiving or scuba diving, or for manual labor like plumbing, or for just casual daywear. Now normally I do formal attire, but…"

"Get on with it, okay?" Suri mumbled.

Rarity straightened up. "Yes, of course. Anyway, who's to say you cannot be practical *and* look fabulous at the same time?"

She illuminated her horn, making the lights dim and the curtains to the stage open. Four models strutted onto the runway, each of them wearing a unique jumpsuit. One was teal with a frilly pink collar, one was white with jagged purple stripes around the hooves and neck, one was dark blue with white hooves, and the final was indigo, decorated with a blue diamond pattern and complimented with an abbreviated spread collar. The ponies in the room oohed at the colorful designs.

"So what do you think?" Rarity asked.

Her boss rubbed her chin. "I like the color choices."

The unicorn smiled.

"But," Suri said, standing up and joining her on the platform, "while the colors are nice, the outfits need more… *pizzazz* !"

Rarity frowned. "Oh, um…of course. Um…how do you mean, exactly?"

"I mean," Suri said as she pointed to the jumpsuits, "these outfits aren't gonna stand out on the streets, okay? Unless you add a little more…sparkle!"

"Sparkle?"

"Accessories! Jewels! Rhinestones! Glitter! Something that will make these suits *shine* !"

Rarity's jaw dropped. "But…for *jumpsuits* ? I can understand accessorizing for haute couture, but jumpsuits are more…prêt-à-porter. That is, *practical* ."

"Then give it *practical* accessories, okay?" She turned to her assistant. "Coco, when's the deadline for the spring line?"

Coco examined her clipboard. "Friday, Miss Polomare."

"Good. That gives you plenty of time to upgrade these designs, kay?"

"But," Rarity said with wide eyes, "that's only two days!"

Suri smiled. "Then I suggest you get cracking." She poked her in the chest. "Kay?"

The unicorn's lower jaw quivered as she tried to get her words out.

"Kay!" Suri clapped her hooves together. "If there are no further comments, let's move on, shall we?"

On the road from Rockville to Maretropolis, Pinkamena was pulling a cart filled with crates of rocks and gems. Now, one would think rocks had no use in the economy, but some ponies bought them for building material, or for decoration, or they were geologists who needed samples. Even so, the jewels were more popular in demand for the simple reasons of being shiny.

Pinkamena Diane Pie didn't mind pulling the heavy cart so much. Hauling boulders for twenty-five years was certainly enough to build up a mare's strength. The journey was just slow and dull. She didn't understand why her father didn't simply get a truck as that would've been much faster. There was hardly any pony to talk to on the road, so Pinkamena found herself bored out of her mind.

At least she was off the dreary rock farm, so her surroundings were much more colorful. She took pleasure in watching the fluffy white clouds pass through the bright blue sky and over the shining sun. One cloud looked like a hot fudge sundae, which made her lick her lips hungrily.

She shook her head. "No, no, Pinkamena. You cannot get distracted. You need to deliver all this stuff on time or else Pa's gonna be really… Hey, look at that cute little chipmunk!"

In Polomare Fashions' supply room, Rarity was searching the drawers frantically for materials to use for accessories. She found buttons, strings, rhinestones, cufflinks, even googly eyes, but so far nothing that looked inspiring. Coco watched the unicorn as she quickly opened and closed each drawer, sometimes more than one with her magic.

"Oh," Rarity said, "how can I possibly find accessories that are showy yet practical and of course compliment the jumpsuits in two days?"

"I'm sure you'll figure something out, Rarity," Coco said assuredly. "Your designs are always the best."

Rarity sighed. "Suri doesn't seem to think so."

"Your jumpsuits were wonderful, Rarity. Suri just…likes to push the limits."

"And push them and push them and push them." She cracked a smile. "Kay?"

Coco giggled softly. "What about beads? You could string them along the collars."

"Hmm," Rarity said, shaking her head. "Bad idea. Didn't I mention some ponies use these suits for plumbing and electrical work? Beads could get caught in the machinery!"

The earth mare nodded as she closed the bead drawer. "That *would* be a disaster."

"I don't know how much longer I can take having that…that… *tycoon* as an employer!"

"She's not all bad," Coco said as she looked in a drawer of rubber bands. "Don't forget, she's the most successful designer in Maretropolis."

"I know." Rarity cradled her head in her hoof. "But the way she runs things. She simply has no regard for other ponies' opinions! I mean have *you* ever seen glitter on a jumpsuit?"

"Can't say that I…"

"COCO!"

The two mares winced at Suri's ear-piercing scream.

"WHERE'S MY COFFEE?!"

"Gotta go," Coco said as she shut the drawer. "Good luck on those accessories."

Rarity shook her head. "Coco, darling, you mustn't let Suri push you around like that."

Her friend blinked. "But…isn't that what you're…?"

"COCO!"

"Bye!" she squeaked before running off.

Sighing, Rarity closed all the open drawers. Coco was right. She had been at this company for a year now and every time she had shown Suri one of her designs, a change had to be made, one on which she always followed through. It wasn't that Rarity was against constructive criticism, but some of Suri's ideas were absolutely absurd.

A navy blazer with black pants? A red polo with a flowery green skirt? And now glittery jumpsuits? Rarity loved glitter as much as the next fashionista, but there was a time and a place for it. This wasn't it.

She leaned her forehead on the wall of drawers. "Think, Rarity. There's got to be a way you can please Suri *and* stay true to your creative vision."

I realized in planning this that having all the ponies earn their powers at the same time would be...well this isn't "Cutie Mark Chronicles." I figured at least two of the team members should be heroes first with solo careers, and based off "Apple Bucking Season," Twilight and Applejack's dynamic seemed the best to work with. Plus, we know AJ used to be a proud pony who refused to ask for help. As Mistress Mare-velous, I kind of saw her as a hero with Batman's attitude and Wonder Woman's powers. There will be more on her backstory later.

What is hard about writing this is trying to follow six characters who at the moment have separate storylines which will eventually intertwine. It's difficult deciding when to jump from one character to the next.

Also, clothes. I had to look a ton of stuff up for the Rarity scenes. I don't even know what's wrong with a navy blazer and black pants. But really, what else would Rarity be doing in a metropolitan area? If she worked at a company I could see her

struggling with the commercialism of fashion. And who would be a nastier boss than Suri?

Pinkie...not much to say on her in this chapter but we will see more of her.

Origins: Part 3

I think at this moment the "Origins" arc will be in four or five parts.

"The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else."

- Umberto Eco

In a therapist's office, two mares sat cross-legged on cushions on the floor. One was a green earth pony wearing a yellow kerchief over her red dreadlocks. Across from her was a yellow pegasus with long flowing pink hair and big teal eyes, wearing a lab coat. Candles surrounded them in a circle and between them a stick of incense burned in a bowl. The earth mare opened her purple eyes.

"Now, Fluttershy," she said. "Have there been any… *incidents* since our last session?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "N-No, but…" She bit her lip. "There was this one time yesterday when…"

She hung her head in shame. The other mare leaned forward and gently raised Fluttershy's chin with her hoof.

"Don't be afraid, Fluttershy," she said soothingly. "You're in a safe space."

Shutting her eyes, Fluttershy took a deep breath. "There…there was a client who came into the clinic with her dog and…she…she was tugging too hard on the leash and…the dog was whimpering and… and…I thought I was gonna lose it."

"But you didn't, right?"

Grinning, she opened her eyes. "No, I…I did those breathing exercises you taught me and…I calmed down."

"Good, good." The earth mare leaned back. "You've made such progress, Fluttershy. For six months now, you've been bathed in positive vibes." She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Your aura is cleansed."

"I'm glad."

"It might be time for you to move on from my guidance."

Fluttershy's smile vanished. "What?"

She looked back up. "I have taught you all I can. The negative energy within you has been put to rest."

"N-No! Dr. Hugger, you can't…"

Dr. Hugger held up her hoof. "No formalities, remember? Just Tree Hugger. Or Tree for short."

Fluttershy sighed. "Tree Hugger, we can't stop these sessions. I…I don't know how long I can keep this up. It…it always happens unexpectedly and…you've been so helpful. Please, you're the only one in Maretropolis I can talk to about this."

Tree Hugger's thick red eyebrows rose. "You still haven't told your roommate?"

"I…I…" She hung her head. "No. How can I? These past two months have been great and she's been so good to me. If…if she knew she might…not want to be friends anymore, let alone roommates."

"Fluttershy," Tree Hugger said, taking her hooves. "The monster in you can't hide forever. Sooner or later, all that anger you have concealed will come to a boil, and the truth will reveal itself. Those closest to you need to be forewarned so they can be prepared when that day comes.

"And besides," she continued, locking gaze with her, "trust is what

builds friendship."

Slowly releasing her hooves, Fluttershy let out another sigh. "I just… don't think she'd still like me if she knew that I was…"

"You don't have to tell her now, but the longer you put it off, the harder it's gonna be." She relaxed into her cross-legged position. "Now. Let us close our eyes, and breathe in as you take in the anger you felt yesterday."

Fluttershy followed her instructions and inhaled slowly as she thought of the aggressive owner. Her hooves twitched slightly.

"Hold it," Tree Hugger said, pausing for four seconds. "Now, as you breathe out, let all the anger flow out of your chakras."

As she released her breath, Fluttershy felt all the tension leave her body. They repeated the exercise until an alarm bell rang and water sprinkled from the ceiling, making Fluttershy cry out.

"TREE HUGGER!" a voice called from outside. "ARE YOU BURNING INCENSE AGAIN?!"

"Whoops." The therapist chuckled throatily as she turned to Fluttershy. "See you next Wednesday?"

"Did you find anything?" Coco asked Rarity as the two of them walked through the streets together after work.

Sighing, Rarity shook her head. "I was in there for *hours* , Coco. I've looked at every bead, every fabric, every sequin, every mane clip, but found nothing."

"Apples!" a country voice called.

The two mares looked up to see a food cart attended by a blond orange earth mare wearing a Stetson and apron. Her cart was adorned with apples and related treats.

"Get yerr apples here! Apple fritters, apple pies, apple dumplings,

apple fries…"

"What do you think?" Rarity asked her friend. "It'd be a nice break from the usual carrot dog or pizza."

"What are apple fries?" Coco said.

They approached the cart and the mare greeted them with a warm smile.

"What can I get y'all?"

"Might I have one of those fritters, please?" Rarity asked, licking her lips daintily.

The vendor turned to Coco. "And you, ma'am?"

"Oh. I guess I'll have the fries. Mainly because I'm not sure what they are."

She laughed. "That'll be four bits, please."

Rarity levitated four coins out of her pink raincoat.

"Oh, Rarity," Coco said, "you don't have to…"

"Tush, tush!" the unicorn said, holding up her hoof. "This is my treat."

She hovered the bits over to the vendor and picked up the fritter and fries with her magic.

"Thank ya kindly, ma'am," the vendor said as she tucked the money into her apron pocket.

After taking a bite out of the warm fritter, Rarity moaned inwardly in pleasure. "My, this is simply divine!"

Coco crunched happily on her fries. "I have no idea how you made these, but they're real tasty!"

The vendor grinned. "Glad *some* ponies in this town think so. Y'all have a nice day, ya hear?"

The two mares waved before continuing down the street.

"Do remind me to design something apple themed in the near future," Rarity said, taking another ladylike bite. "Once I solve this jumpsuit dilemma, of course."

Coco swallowed her fry. "What if you decorated the suits with apples? Not real ones, of course. But an apple pattern or something."

"Hmm." Her eyes lit up. "Yes, that could…" Then she frowned. "No, no, no. You're forgetting that Mistress Mare-velous has apple-shaped cufflinks. We do not want to risk a lawsuit."

"Oh," her friend said sadly, popping another fry into her mouth.

"It was a good idea, darling, but it just wasn't…"

Suddenly she stopped, took a few steps back and turned to the window of Bray Jewelers.

"What is it?" Coco asked as she squinted through the glass.

Instead of answering, Rarity threw the glass door open and galloped inside. Some of Coco's fries fell out of their pouch as she raced after her. Rarity stopped at a glass case display of two pink diamond bracelets.

"Look at those kite-cut pink diamonds, Coco!"

"They're pretty," Coco said.

"They're not just pretty." Rarity smiled widely. "They're the right color, the right shape, they would go perfectly with the indigo suit! You know, the one with the diamond pattern? And you know something?" She rubbed her chin. "If I could string a few of those gems into the model's mane and tail, it would *really* bring out…"

"Hold on, Rarity. They're pretty, but they're pretty expensive too."

She pointed to the price tag, making Rarity frown.

"Oh." She hung her head. "You're right. With my salary, I couldn't possibly afford them."

Coco patted her on the back. "It was a good idea, Rarity. I'm sure these diamonds would've made your jumpsuit even better."

A voice a few feet away from them spoke. "Mr. Cutter, how much for those pink diamond bracelets?"

Rarity looked up and saw a tall pink earth mare in a purple pantsuit taking out her credit card for the unicorn shopkeeper.

"And it seems some pony else has bought them anyway." She sighed. "Oh well, it was a pleasant dream while it lasted."

"That dream can be a reality."

The two mares looked up to see the tall pink mare grinning down at them, her blue eyes glinting.

"What are you talking about, ma'am?" Coco asked.

She gestured to the shopkeeper to open up the case. "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's when an artist can't complete her creative vision for the ridiculous reason of not having enough money."

Rarity squinted at the mare and gasped. "Y-You're…you're Dee Tangler!"

Coco's jaw dropped. " *The* Dee Tangler? Creator of Tangler's Shampoo?!"

"And conditioner, and hairspray, and hair dye," Dee said with a chuckle as she ran her hoof through her long blue mane. "That's me, alright." She looked at Rarity. "And you, darling, seem like a pony who is very passionate about fashion. I've always considered mane styling to be a fashion of its own, so you can understand why I feel the need to do this for you."

Once the case was open, she handed the bracelets to Rarity. "All yours, my dear."

The unicorn gasped as the bracelets were placed in her hooves. "R-Really? B-But…I couldn't possibly…"

Dee waved her hoof. "Consider it an investment in your future, Miss…"

"Rarity."

"And what company do you work for, Rarity?"

"Polomare Fashions."

"Oh." Dee scrunched her muzzle. "I know Suri Polomare personally. She can be a hoofful, can't she?"

Coco giggled. "A little."

"Well, Miss Rarity, why don't we make a deal?" She crouched down. "I give you these diamonds, and when your outfit is completed, you will design something exclusive for me. Deal?"

Rarity shuttered in excitement as she shook the businessmare's hoof. "Deal…M-Miss Tangler."

"Please. Friends call me Dee."

She had to bite her lip to contain herself. "T-Thank you…D-D-Dee!"

The two friends squealed as they galloped out of the shop.

"That was a very generous thing to do, Miss Tangler," the shopkeeper said.

"She reminds me of myself when I was her age," Dee said. "Young, full of ideas. Who knows?" She leaned against the now empty case. "She might become as successful as I have."

When Fluttershy opened the door to her apartment, she was greeted by a brown and white dog who was barking excitedly. The dog nocked her to the floor and began licking her face.

"Hello, Wynona!" Fluttershy said, laughing. "Yes, yes, it's good to see you too!"

"Is that you, Fluttershy?" a female country voice called from another room. "I'm in the kitchen!"

Wiping the drool off her face, Fluttershy stood and trotted into the kitchen, Wynona following at her hooves. An orange mare with a freckled face was at the stove, stirring into a pot, creating a delightful aroma. A straw-colored ponytail hung out from under her Stetson and down her back. She looked at Fluttershy with bright green eyes and gave a friendly smile.

"Howdy there," she said. "Hope you're in the mood for gumbo."

"Smells delicious, Applejack," Fluttershy said, inhaling the scent.

She heard a crunching noise and looked to the counter. A small white bunny was nibbling on a carrot in a tiny bowl.

"I didn't think ya'd mind," Applejack said. "Angel there was gettin' real fussy, so I got 'im a lil' somethin'."

"Oh, it's fine," Fluttershy said. "Sorry I'm a little late tonight. I had a hard time getting a taxi from Tree Hugger's office."

"What ya keep seein' that kooky shrink for anyway?"

"Tree Hugger's not kooky. She's just…creative in her methods."

"Mmm-hmm," Applejack grunted as she turned back to the pot of gumbo. "But I've been here two months and ya haven't told me what ya need therapy for."

Fluttershy stared down at the floor. "Um…well, uh…"

"Aw, don't think ya need to be ashamed, Sugar Cube. Lots o' ponies need professional help every now and then. Why, I used to see a shrink when I was a filly, after my folks had…" She stopped stirring for a moment. "Well, anyway. None o' my business."

Fluttershy looked at her and considered. "It's for, um…" She bit her

lip. "Anger management?"

Applejack paused and turned to her. Then she threw her head back in laughter, making the pegasus jump.

" *You* ?! Anger management?!" She covered her mouth. "Yeah, right! Like *you* need anger management therapy! Why, just last week I broke the showerhead and you were as docile as a lamb grazin' in the fields! Seriously, some pony could rob us blind and ya wouldn't bat an eyelash!"

"You'd be surprised," Fluttershy said under her breath.

The egg timer dinged and Applejack switched off the stove.

"By the way," she said, going to the cupboard for bowls, "ya doin' anything tonight?"

"N-No," her roommate replied, shaking her head. "Why?"

"I got some tickets from a friend." She began scooping the hot soup into the bowls. "For this museum exhibit on Ancient Grace. That's why I'm makin' supper a lil' early. Ya interested?"

She handed Fluttershy a bowl and she took it.

"Is it gonna be…crowded?"

Applejack shrugged. "Might be. They're unveilin' this real important artifact called Zeus' Lightning Bolt. Supposed to be legendary."

"I don't know," Fluttershy said as she sat down at the counter.

Applejack sensed her hesitance as she sat across from her. "Ya don't have to go if ya don't wanna. It's just that…well, I don't have that many friends here in Maretropolis, and it'd be a shame to waste that extra ticket."

"No, no. I'll go. I…I like Ancient Grace. It has so many wonderful stories on animals."

Her roommate grinned. "Okay. The exhibit's at eight."

Taking their spoons, they began eating their gumbo.

"Mmm," Fluttershy said, her eyes rolling backward. "When you open your restaurant, you should definitely put this on the menu."

"Yeah, well," Applejack said as she took another spoonful. "I halfta get the apple cart rollin' first."

"How's that been going?"

She shook her head. "Not so good. Every pony on the street today was hungry for those highly-processed carrot dogs. No pony in this town wants good old-fashioned homemade goods. That reminds me." She looked apologetically at Fluttershy. "I might not be able to pay my half of the rent this month."

"It's alright," Fluttershy said, reaching across the table to touch her hoof. "I can cover the rest with my salary."

"But I don't want ya thinkin' I'm freeloadin', after ya took me in and all…"

"No really, it's fine." She smiled kindly. "If you want, we can consider the free tickets your payment for the month."

Applejack grinned in return. "You're a real peach, ya know that, Fluttershy?"

Once they had finished their meal, Fluttershy offered to wash the dishes and Applejack retreated to her bedroom. After shutting the door and window blinds, she went to her closet. Taking a key out from under her hat, she unlocked it.

Folded on a table was a red and black jumpsuit. A golden rope and black saddle carrying golden horseshoes lay on top. Applejack shut the closet door and approached the table. She looked up at the newspaper clippings scattered across the wall. The headlines read: "Longhorn Strikes Again," "Canter Creek Conquered by Cattle," "Longhorn Spotted in Dodge Junction," "Cattle Rustlers Still At Large."

One particular clipping in the center stood out to her. It showed the

image of a mare and a stallion, both masked and wearing Stetsons. A lasso hung from the stallion's saddle. A tear fell from Applejack's eye as she read the headline over and over: "Round-Up Rangers Murdered."

Closing her eyes, she thought back to that horrible day. She had been just a filly, standing over her parents' newly impaled bodies. She could still hear the cruel laughter coming from the burly bull whose horns were dripping with their blood.

Applejack opened her eyes and looked at a map on the wall. It was covered in red X's, with one big circle surrounding Maretropolis. She glanced at a target. Taped onto it was a poster of a gray bull in a black Stetson. It read:

WANTED

DEAD OR ALIVE

KING LONGHORN

FOR VANDALISM, THEFT, TAX FRAUD…

"…and murder," Applejack said, reading the last two words.

Letting out a passionate cry of anger, she picked up one of her horseshoes and threw it at the target, piercing the smug-faced bull's forehead.

It was getting late, and Pinkamena had only just arrived in Maretropolis. She searched frantically for her destination.

"You lost, hon?" a carrot vendor asked.

"Kind of," Pinkamena said, looking to the earth stallion. "You wouldn't happen to know where I can find Bray Jewelers, would ya?"

He pointed down the street. "Go down another five blocks, turn the corner, keep going and you'll find it on your left. But you better hurry. Shop's closing pretty soon."

"Thanks, pal!"

As soon as she started up again, an alarm broke out. She stopped and turned to the Maretropolis Bank just in time to see a pink light envelop the glass doors and make them explode. A blue unicorn in a star-patterned purple cape stepped out of the debris laughing. Moneybags hovered at her side as she placed her purple magician's hat back on her head.

"Once again," she said, "the Great and Powerful Trixie is victorious!"

Sirens blared as two police cars drove up. Four cops jumped out and pointed their pistols at the unicorn.

"Whoops," she said, reaching into the pocket of her cape. "Time for Trixie's final trick. Her disappearing act!"

As she threw her hoof down, she was suddenly encased in a puff of smoke. When it died down, Trixie and the moneybags had vanished. Pinkamena turned her head to see the crook running down the street.

"See you never!" she called tauntingly.

"Hey!" Pinkamena shouted to the cops. "She's getting away!"

The carrot dog vendor raised an eyebrow. "You're new here, aren't you?"

She cocked her head. "What do you mean by that?"

Her mane whipped to the side as something whooshed overhead. Looking up, she saw what appeared to be a pony in a peculiar costume. Pinkamena gasped at the large purple wings.

"Is that…an *alicorn* ?!"

The vendor smirked. "Yup. Definitely a newbie."

The alicorn was so fast that she caught up with Trixie and flew into her path.

"Oh, darn it!" Trixie said, skidding to a halt. "Don't you have anything better to do than to ruin my life?"

"Don't you have anything better to do than to rob a bank?" the Masked Matter-Horn said. "Honestly, Trixie. I thought you were too good for that sort of thing."

"A girl's gotta make a living somehow. After all, my reputation as a traveling magician was destroyed by you!"

The hero rolled her eyes. "All I did was expose the fraud that you were to every pony. Not to mention you were stealing your audience's jewelry!"

She casually flipped back her platinum mane. "No pony's perfect."

She threw down another smoke bomb, making the Masked Matter-Horn cough.

"You'll never catch me, Matter-Horn!"

Trixie was now running towards Pinkamena, laughing in triumph. But the Matter-Horn was quick to recover and Pinkamena watched in awe as she shot a blue beam at Trixie.

"Freeze ray!" she shouted.

The beam missed Trixie, but hit one of the floating moneybags, encasing it in ice. It instantly dropped to the ground.

"Wow," Pinkamena uttered.

"Curses!" Trixie exclaimed. "No matter! Trixie's still got more than enough for a trip to Las Pegasus!"

The hero fired her freeze ray again, this time hitting the street.

"Ha! You miss—GAH!"

She slipped onto the ice and slid into a lamppost, making her drop the moneybags.

"Give up, Trixie!" the Matter-Horn said, hovering over her. "It's back to Balkham Asylum with you!"

Trixie hung her head. "Alright." She slowly stood. "You've got me." Her hoof slid into her cape. "Trixie will come quietly and…"

She whipped out a string of handkerchiefs, tossing it at the hero. It instantly wrapped around the Matter-Horn's eyes.

"Gah!" she cried out as she tugged at the blindfold.

"No peeking!" Trixie said as she bolted off.

She laughed as she picked up the money and galloped down the hill. She was now directly behind the rock cart. Pinkamena glanced back at the Matter-Horn, who was now using her magic to undo the blindfold. Looking back at Trixie, Pinkamena made a split-decision as she unhitched herself from the cart and kicked it with her back leg.

"Oops."

Trixie didn't see the cart coming. Pinkamena couldn't help but giggle when she heard the criminal's yelp and a crash. The police rushed over to the now broken cart and pulled the bruised unicorn out from under a pile of rocks.

"The Great," she said, wincing, "and… *Painful* …Trixie…never… gives…"

They slapped a metal cuff on her horn to prevent her from using magic. The Masked Matter-Horn flew over to Pinkamena.

"Thanks, citizen," she said with a salute. "Maretropolis owes you a debt of gratitude."

Pinkamena felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment as she saluted in return. She was still in awe as she watched the hero zoom off into the evening sky.

"Uh, miss?" the carrot dog vendor said. "Your cart?"

Pinkamena's heart sank as she looked back at the cart she had just destroyed. Rocks and gems had burst out of their crates and were scattered all over the street. What had she done?

"Pa's gonna kill me!"

"Ever been here before?" Applejack asked her roommate as they entered the Maretropolis Museum.

"A f-few times," Fluttershy said, looking to the side. "M-My parents used to take me and Zephyr when we were little."

As Applejack turned a corner, Fluttershy paused a moment to glance at a sign pointing to the sculpture gardens.

"Ya comin', Flutters?"

The pegasus picked up her pace. The entrance to the exhibit was blocked off by a red velvet rope. A security guard moved in front of them and held up his hoof. After seeing their tickets, he stepped to the side and unhooked the velvet rope.

"Oh my," Fluttershy said as she looked around the room nervously. "T-There certainly are a lot of p-p-ponies, aren't there?"

"Yeah." Applejack noticed how a lot of the mares were wearing expensive ball gowns and jewelry. "Real high-society types too."

She heard her friend's teeth chattering and put her foreleg around her.

"Don't you worry, Fluttershy. You just stick close to me, okay?" She pointed to the amphorae on display. "Hey, look at those jars! Let's go see what they're all about!"

Fluttershy calmed down once she saw the beautifully painted images. One amphora showed a pegasus stallion in a tunic sitting on a cloud. In his hoof was a zigzag object, which he was handing down to an earth mare. Applejack read the display label out loud.

" *Found by Daring Do in the long-lost Temple of Zeus, this image is believed to represent the Gracian god Zeus granting his lightning bolt to a mortal mare. The identity of the mare is unknown.* "
Applejack looked back up at the jar. "Ya think that bolt there really looks all zigzaggy, or maybe it's just artistic license or…?"

She then realized Fluttershy wasn't listening to her, for she was staring at another amphora. This one had the picture of a tall, peculiar creature that resembled a dragon, only his body seemed to be made of different animal parts. In its claw dangled a round pendant with lines coming out of it to show its brightness. Fluttershy's eyes seemed particularly focused on that.

"You okay?"

"Hmm?" She shook her head. "Oh, um, I'm fine. It's just…that's a pretty scary monster."

"Come on," Applejack said, taking her hoof. "Let's go look at those sculptures."

Behind the curtains of the stage, a small purple dragon with green spines was peering out at the crowd anxiously.

"Hey, you!"

The dragon cried out and nearly dropped his clipboard as he turned to the tall, gray stallion in a blue suit staring down at him with green eyes. His dark gray mane was tied back in a ponytail.

"Where's Miss Sparkle? She was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago!"

"She'll be here, Mr. Fetlock!" the dragon insisted, glancing at his watch. "She, uh, just…got caught in traffic! I'm sure she'll be here any second now!"

Mr. Fetlock groaned. "Businessmares. You can never trust them to be on time."

The dragon let out a sigh of relief as the curator walked away. His ears perked up when he heard the backdoor fling open and a

lavender unicorn in a purple pantsuit came running up to him.

"I'm here!" she shouted. "Sorry I'm late, I…"

"Uh, Twilight?" the dragon said, pointing to his eyes with two fingers.

Twilight's eyes crossed as she attempted to look at the bronze goggles sitting on her muzzle.

"Oh!" She chuckled as she lifted them off with her magic and tucked them into her suit. "Thanks, Spike."

"Well, Miss Sparkle," Mr. Fetlock snorted as he came up behind her. "You took your sweet time, didn't you?"

Twilight smiled innocently. "So sorry, Mr. Fetlock. There was this meeting and…"

He held up his hoof. "I don't want to hear any excuses. We've wasted enough time already."

He pushed back the curtains and went out onstage to the podium. He tapped the microphone.

"May I have your attention, please?"

The room quieted down and all eyes were on the curator.

"I would like to thank you all for coming to this event. As I'm sure you've heard, we have a very special and very rare artifact with us here today. But before we unveil it, I would like to introduce the mare whose funding has made this new exhibition possible. Mares and gentlecolts, please welcome the CEO of Sparkle Labs, Miss Twilight Sparkle."

While every pony else applauded, Applejack whispered to Fluttershy, "Who's she?"

"Twilight Sparkle's one of the richest and most successful ponies in Maretropolis," Fluttershy replied. "Her company's funded the museum, the public library, the university, and all sorts of other establishments for years."

Twilight walked onto the stage and shook Mr. Fetlock's hoof before taking his place at the podium.

"Thank you, every pony," she said in a pleasant voice. "We at Sparkle Labs value the pursuit of knowledge and the willingness to share it with the world. That is why this museum is one of my favorite places in Maretropolis. This is where history is preserved and brought to life for every pony young and old to see. Today, we have with us an artifact which, according to legend, had been a gift from Zeus himself to a mortal pony with a noble heart and soul, a weapon that only she could wield. For over a thousand years, it has been lost, but thanks to the brave endeavors of our archaeologists, it is has been recovered, and is here for your viewing pleasure. Mares and gentlecolts, I present to you, Zeus' Lightning Bolt."

She stepped to the side as the curtains opened. The necklace was placed high on a pedestal with a glass case protecting it. The crowd oohed at the sight.

"Huh," Applejack said. "I thought it'd be bigger."

Twilight came back to the mic. "And now, the brave archaeologist who led the expedition to retrieve the lightning bolt will be taking questions from the press. Mares and gentlecolts, Miss Daring Do."

The audience clapped and whistled as the famous adventurer stepped out in her green suit. Backstage, Rainbow Dash, in her blue suit and tie, let out a sigh.

"Something wrong?" Spike asked.

"She's gonna leave me out again," Rainbow said.

"Miss Do," one of the reporters asked, "did you run into any trouble while retrieving the lightning bolt?"

"We did have a run-in with my old enemy Ahuizotl," Daring said, "but other than that, it was a cinch."

"How did you fight him off?" another reporter asked.

Rainbow watched Daring as she bit her lip.

"I, um…it was easy. I kicked his catty minions off me and they scattered away in fear."

Rainbow let out a groan. "At least that's half the truth."

"I know how you feel," Spike said. "It's not easy being the assistant to some pony famous." He leaned forward to whisper. "You know what Twilight's had me do?"

She crouched lower in interest. "What?"

"Her pencil broke, and she asked me to get a new one, but I couldn't find any in her office, so I had to go all the way down from the twenty-fifth floor to the basement to get one! You wanna know what the worst part of it was?"

"What?"

He winced. "The elevator was out of order!"

Her jaw dropped. "Wow."

"I know, right?" He sighed. "But it's not like I hate her for it or anything. Twilight raised me from an egg. She's like a mom to me, or at least a big sister. I never knew my real parents. I'm lucky to have her."

Rainbow hung her head. "It's not that I don't appreciate working with Daring, but sometimes I'd like a little credit for all I do for her. For example, she wouldn't've made it out of that temple alive if I hadn't…"

She paused when she caught a sideways glare from her boss.

"…h-helped a little."

Mr. Fetlock returned to the podium. "If there are no further questions, please, help yourselves to the buffet we have prepared and enjoy the rest of the exhibition. No flash photography, please."

The crowd murmured as they went back to mingling. Daring Do retreated backstage.

"Dash," she said, grabbing her assistant by the foreleg. "A word?"

Rainbow waved weakly to Spike before she was dragged behind the curtain leg and flipped around to face her boss, who did not look happy.

"I thought we agreed not to talk about what happened in the Temple of Zeus."

"But Boss," Rainbow said. "Why do we have to keep the bolt here in a museum? I mean…I was able to use its power. Doesn't that mean it belongs to me or something?"

"It's too much power for one pony!" Daring snapped. "You wouldn't be able to handle it!"

"But…it chose me…"

She grabbed her by the shoulders. "The lightning bolt is a historical artifact. It belongs in a museum. I know it gave you a taste of power, but it's *dangerous* power, Dash, power you don't know how to use."

She grinned weakly. "I could learn…"

"The answer is no. The bolt stays here in the museum where it can't do any harm. Just forget about what happened in the temple and don't ever bring it up again."

"But…"

Daring poked her in the chest. "That's an order!" She sighed and moved past her. "Now come on, let's go mingle."

Hanging her head, Rainbow followed her. "Whatever ya say, Boss."

On the other side of the stage, Spike was catching up to Twilight as she stepped down into the fray.

"That was a close call just now, Twilight," he whispered. "Just this week you've been late to three board meetings, two charity auctions, a gala, and an opera! I know you wanna help keep Maretropolis safe, but you can't keep this up on your own."

Twilight sighed. "I know, Spike, but the city depends on the Masked Matter-Horn. If she suddenly stopped coming to save the day…"

"I didn't say you had to stop being the Matter-Horn. I'm just saying you could use a little help." He suavely brushed back his spines. "Maybe a sidekick you can trust to always be there for you?"

She shook her head. "I have thought about it, but Mistress Mare-velous doesn't want to team up."

He frowned. "Actually, I was talking about…"

"Twilight! Yoo hoo!"

Twilight looked up to see two mares at the punchbowl. One was Dee Tangler, the other a pink unicorn with a purple mane streaked with blue, wearing a maroon pinstriped suit.

Rolling her eyes, Twilight said, "Time to mingle with the other business elite."

"Want me to make an excuse?" Spike asked.

"No, no. You go take a break and get something to eat."

He licked his lips. "If you say so."

"Not the jewels! They're part of the display!"

"Twilight, over here!" the pink unicorn called again.

Taking a deep breath and putting on a smile, Twilight approached the pair. "Dee, Starlight! Always a pleasure to see you girls!"

"Wonderful speech there, darling!" Dee said. "And I must say your mane looks absolutely gorgeous today!"

"Well," she replied, brushing her hoof through her mane, "I've been using your shampoo and conditioner." She turned to the other mare. "So Starlight, how are things at Glimmer Industries?"

"Splendid!" Starlight exclaimed. "One of our scientists has made a

breakthrough on cutie mark magic! Imagine: making cutie marks appear *before* you realize your special talent!"

The corners of Twilight's mouth dropped a little. "That sounds…nice, but…wouldn't that defeat the purpose of discovering one's talent for oneself?"

"Maybe, but think of how much we could make on the cream! I'm thinking of calling it," she said as she held up her hoof to emphasize each word, "'Cutie Mark Revealer!'"

Dee scoffed. "That's nothing. Wait until you hear what *my* scientists are working on. You know how most mane growth formulas can take weeks, even months to take effect?"

Starlight nodded. "Those things *never* work!"

"Well," she said, running her hoof through her luscious mane. "What if I told you we're on the verge of creating a formula that could cause a mane to grow in *seconds* ?"

The two mares' jaws dropped.

"That's not possible," Twilight said.

Dee smirked. "Not for long."

"Twilight Sparkle!" a reporter called, trotting up to her. "Can I get an interview with you for the *Grand Galloping Gazette* ?"

"Of course." She grinned at the businessmares. "Excuse me."

As soon as she turned around, Twilight dropped her smile. Once she was out of hearing, Dee and Starlight too stopped smiling and let out equal groans.

"I can't stand her," Starlight said.

"I know," Dee said, sipping her punch. "She's too… *chipper* !"

"She's going to steal my Cutie Mark Revealer idea. I just know it!"

"Now, now, Starlight," Dee said, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "Remember, it's better to be allies in the business world than competitors." As she walked away, she mumbled under her breath, "Besides, it's a stupid idea."

Starlight scoffed once she was alone. "Mane growth formula! Like *that'll* ever work!"

At the buffet table, Fluttershy and Applejack were assembling dishes of fruit. The latter was glancing cautiously around the room.

"Is everything alright?" Fluttershy asked.

"Hmm?" Applejack said, turning her head sharply.

"You've seemed a bit…anxious all evening. And that's saying a lot coming from me."

"It's nothing. I was just…"

"Fluttershy?"

The two of them spun around and Fluttershy gasped at the pony coming towards her.

"Rainbow Dash!"

She bounded to her and wrapped her hooves around her neck.

"What are you doing here?" Fluttershy asked as she pulled away.

"I'm here with Daring Do," Rainbow said, rubbing the back of her neck. "I'm, uh, kinda her assistant now."

"Really? That must be exciting!"

"Fluttershy, who is this?" Applejack asked.

"Oh! How rude of me! Rainbow, this is my roommate Applejack. Applejack, this is my old friend Rainbow Dash. We were in flight camp together."

"Hi," Rainbow said, sticking out her hoof.

"Pleased to make yerr acquaintance," Applejack said, shaking it. "So, did ya help Daring Do get that there lightning bolt?"

"Oh yeah. Let me tell you, it wasn't as easy as she made it sound. She was pinned to the ground by Ahuizotl's carnivorous cats. Ahuizotl tried to steal the lightning bolt, but it shocked him! It landed right next to my hoof, so I grabbed it and…"

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her boss talking to Twilight Sparkle. Rainbow swallowed her words and sighed.

"It…shocked me too and…distracted the cats long enough for Daring to beat them up and scare them away."

"I still think it was brave of you to try, Rainbow," Fluttershy said. "I know I would've froze up in a situation like that."

"Keep it up," Applejack said, playfully punching Rainbow in the shoulder, "and ya might just get into some real action one day."

"Yeah," Rainbow said as she gazed longingly at the bolt on display. "One day."

Across the room, Daring Do was scrutinizing the crowd.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, Miss Do," Twilight said. "No pony in their right mind would try and rob a museum while it's open."

"You don't know Ahuizotl," Daring said. "He's not afraid to make his presence known."

Suddenly she stiffened.

"What is it?" Twilight asked.

Ignoring her question, Daring bolted towards the curator.

"Mr. Fetlock!" she called.

"Yes?" the curator groaned, spinning around.

She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him in so she could

whisper. "The security guards. Where did you find 'em?"

"Oh, them?" He glanced at the two burly guards near the display case. "They're new, but they have excellent references."

She pulled him closer. "Where did they say they were from?"

"Someplace in Central Amare-ica, I gather. Foreign fellows."

Daring squinted as a third guard walked onto the stage. His face was concealed by his hat, but Daring could just make out the stubble on his tan chin. She pushed through the crowd as the guard got closer to the display case.

"Caballeron, stop!"

The guard turned sharply and sent the archaeologist a toothy smile.

"Looks like we will have to resort to Plan B, boys!" he called out in a foreign accent.

All the security guards pulled out their guns on the crowd, who gasped in horror.

"Guard the exits!" Caballeron ordered.

Ponies tried to make a dash for it, but even the guards at the exits appeared to be minions of Caballeron as they prevented the guests with their weapons.

"I wasn't expecting you, Caballeron," Daring said boldly. "Whaddya want the bolt for? Power? Money?"

"Eh," Caballeron said with a shrug. "A little bit of both. You see, not only was I paid to retrieve the bolt, but my employer has also offered me a seat of power under his new regime."

"Your employer?"

A blood-curdling hiss echoed throughout the room and Ahuizotl stomped through the entrance, his carnivorous cats dutifully following him.

"That would be me, Daring Do!"

He snapped his tail fingers and the cats dispersed into the crowd. Every pony screamed as they were herded into corners.

"Stay where you are," Caballeron shouted, "and no pony gets hurt!"

"And should any pony call the police…" Ahuizotl said.

He whipped his tail to knock a cell phone out of a pony's hoof.

"You won't get away with this!" Daring exclaimed.

Ahuizotl and Caballeron chuckled.

"But we already have!" the latter said as he turned to his henchponies. "Subdue her!"

The two fake guards leaped at the adventurer, but she held them off with her kicks and punches. As the fight continued, Applejack pulled Fluttershy behind one of the display cases.

"Stay here," she told her before rising back up.

"Where are you going?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"To get help."

Fluttershy raised her eyebrow in confusion as Applejack ducked under the buffet table. Glancing around to make sure she was alone, Applejack took off her hat where her costume and weapons were stored.

As Ahuizotl's tiger closed in on a group of ponies, Twilight crept against the wall and slipped into the restroom. She used her magic to throw the stalls open. Once she was assured that they were empty, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the spell.

Terra, pennae, cornibus , she thought repeatedly. *Terra, pennae, cornibus .*

Her horn illuminated as she thought harder.

Terra, pennae, cornibus. Terra, pennae, cornibus .

Her back lit up as something started to emerge.

Terra, pennae, cornibus. TERRA, PENNAE CORNIBUS!

Large lavender wings sprouted, tearing through her suit. Her horn sent another surge of power and slowly encased her from head to hoof. As it did, her mane and outfit transformed into those of the Masked Matter-Horn and a mask and goggles appeared on her face. Once the transformation was complete, she smiled into the bathroom mirror and said:

"Time to declaw some bad kitties."

If you've read the Power Ponies comic, you'll get some of the references.

I figured if Fluttershy was ever in a metropolitan setting, she would be a veterinarian, and Applejack...well, I don't think she'd really fit in after the Manehattan episodes. BTW, Longhorn is a villain from the IDW comics. As for Twilight, with her magic and knowledge she'd be really successful as a scientist/business pony. So I've got Applejack with Batman's backstory and attitude with Wonder Woman's powers and Twilight with Batman's secret identity and Superman's powers (I think). I realized it would be difficult for Twilight to keep her secret identity if she was the only alicorn in Maretropolis, so I provided the solution that she had a magic spell that could grant her wings. More on all that later.

I was originally gonna show Trixie's origin as a villain in this universe, but the more I thought about it the more similar it sounded to "Boast Busters."

" *Terra, pennae, cornibus* " a **re the Latin words for "earth, wings/ feathers, horns."**

Bray Jewelers = Kay Jewelers

Origins: Part 4

I know it's short, but I didn't want to pack two major action scenes into one chapter. Plus, they're exhausting. Why'd I pick a premise with so much action?

"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping Together is a progress. Working together is a success."

- Henry Ford

The two thugs were sitting on top of Daring Do, who was attempting to wriggle out from under them.

"You disappoint us, Daring Do," Caballeron said. "We actually thought you might pose a problem."

"Caballeron, the bolt!" Ahuizotl barked.

"Patience, my friend."

Caballeron carefully lifted the glass off the case. The alarms must have been disabled because nothing rang out. Chuckling, he slipped on a glove and reached for the bolt. Suddenly, a rope snapped at his hoof, forcing him to retract it as he cried out in pain.

"Don't ya know this is a museum, boys?"

The rope flew back to Mistress Mare-velous, who was standing on the buffet table, smirking.

"Ya can look," she said, brushing her golden bangs back, "but ya can't touch."

"Who are you?!" Ahuizotl demanded.

"And how did you get in here?" Caballeron asked.

Telekinetically twirling her lasso in the air, the hero hopped off the table and sashayed towards the stage. "I'm the defender of this here town, and if there's one thing I can't stand, it's when doggone dirty crooks like y'all stick their hooves, or paws or…whatever ya got there, where they don't belong."

Ahuizotl's eyes widened when he saw the rope spinning on its own. "Demeter's Lasso."

She turned to him. "I see you're familiar with Ole Bessie here." The lasso spun faster. "How 'bout I let the two of ya get better acquainted?"

The rope snapped forward, but Ahuizotl jumped out of the way before it could wring his neck.

"Ha!" he said as he scampered across the floor. "You'll have to do better than that, Soldier of Demeter!"

While Mare-velous was distracted with Ahuizotl, Caballeron reached once again for the necklace. In a blue flash, his hoof was instantly encased in ice.

"Gah!" he screamed. "What in the…?"

"Caught you red-hoofed!" the Masked Matter-Horn called as she swooped down from the ceiling. "Or rather *blue* -hoofed!"

She fired another ice beam at him, but Caballeron ducked and rolled out of the way.

"What is with this town?!" he shouted. "Why can't you have weak, defenseless mares like any other town?!"

Mare-velous snapped around at those words. "Oh, you did not just say that."

Caballeron tried dragging himself off the stage, but thanks to one of Mare-velous' horseshoes, he was out colder than his hoof. Ahuizotl raised his fingers to his mouth and whistled. His cats' heads turned

to him in attention.

"Tigre, Leopardo!" he said, pointing to the tiger and leopard. "Stop those mares!"

Tigre and Leopardo crouched down low as they prowled towards Mistress Mare-velous on both sides. The Matter-Horn landed behind her.

"Nice to see you showed up," she whispered.

"What kept ya?" Mare-velous asked.

The alicorn smirked. "So you admit that you need my help?"

She rolled her eyes and glanced between the feline predators. "Don't suppose ya've got a plan?"

"At the very last moment," the Matter-Horn said in a low voice, "we jump out of the way."

"Then what?" Mare-velous pulled out a horseshoe. "Divide and conquer?"

She nodded. "I'll take the cats. If I freeze them, I can take them to the Maretropolis Zoo unharmed. They are endangered, after all."

"And I'll keep those goons away from the bolt."

"You just read my mind. Just try not to destroy any of the ancient artifacts in the process."

"Gotcha."

"First help Daring Do," the Matter-Horn said, tilting her head toward the trapped adventurer. "She can get every pony out of here safely."

The tiger and leopard were closing in on them.

"Wait for it," the alicorn murmured.

With mighty roars, the cats pounced.

"Now!"

The heroes zipped off in separate directions, causing the tiger and leopard to collide into each other and fall to the floor. Mare-velous immediately flung her horseshoe at the stallions sitting on top of Daring Do, striking one of them in the back of the head. Once he had slid off, Daring was able to raise her flank and then buck the other thug off.

"Could've handled them myself," she murmured.

"Get these ponies outta here," Mare-velous said, mentally snapping her rope to its full length. "We'll take care o' the rest."

Daring nodded and dashed toward the guarded exit. Meanwhile, the Matter-Horn had frozen the unconscious tiger and leopard and now the lynx and panther were after her, leaving the guests free to rush out of the room. The two guards' eyes widened at the incoming crowd of ponies.

"Forget the hostages!" Ahuizotl told them. "Grab the bolt!"

All the thugs who were awake, the two guards and one of Daring's previous captors, hastened toward the stage. Daring saw where they were headed as she ushered the guests out of the room.

"Mare-velous!" she called, pointing to the stage.

"I'm on it!" Mare-velous said, taking out two other horseshoes.

Just as two of the thugs were approaching the display case, she tossed her weapons at him, hitting one in the gut and the other in the jaw, which was enough to knock them over. The last thug laughed as he charged for the bolt, but the lasso caught his back hoof and tugged him into the air. He cried out as he was spun around and brought down upon his comrades. Mare-velous jumped onto the stage as the rope tied all three of them up.

"Looks like wrappin' all those Hearth's Warmin' gifts really paid off, huh?" she said with a smirk.

Meanwhile, Rainbow was trying to assist Daring Do with the guests,

but there were so many ponies flocking towards the exit that she got swept away in the chaos. Suddenly she found herself on the floor, her vision blurry. She felt around for her glasses, until she heard something shatter.

"Oh, this is just perfect," she said with a groan.

The Matter-Horn had managed to freeze all the cats, which did not make Ahuizotl happy.

"No one harms my pets!" he exclaimed as he drew two knives from his belt. "No one!"

He flung the weapons at the alicorn. She avoided one, but the other grazed her wing, forcing her to the ground. Ahuizotl cackled as he closed in on her.

"Hang on, partner!" Mare-velous called as she reached for her belt.

But she was out of horseshoes and the rope was currently being used.

"Shoot," she mumbled. "I gotta remember to use these things sparingly!"

The Matter-Horn shot an ice beam at him, but he ducked and the beam hit a marble statue of Aphrodite.

"My statue!" Mr. Fetlock cried.

"We'll fix it later!" Daring Do said as she dragged him out. "Let's go!"

The alicorn prepared to fire again, but Ahuizotl was ready and kicked her hard in the head, leaving her dazed. Mare-velous charged towards him.

"Valliant effort on all your parts," he said, crouching to the ground. "But I'm afraid I'll have to cut our battle short."

He leaped over her and the low amount of friction between the floor and her clothed hooves made it difficult for Mare-velous to slow down. She collided into her colleague. All this time, Fluttershy had

slowly been making her way along the wall to the exit and was now watching the scene behind a plant. She was so horrified, she could no longer move, and the rage towards Ahuizotl that was building up inside her was making her hooves shake.

"Don't get angry," she whispered, closing her eyes and breathing slowly. "Don't get angry, don't get angry, don't get angry…"

By this time, Ahuizotl was nearing the lightning bolt.

"At last," he said as he put on a glove.

Although Rainbow couldn't see very well, she could hear that the heroes were losing and could make out the giant blue smudge that was Ahuizotl. Knowing she had to do something, Rainbow felt around the floor. Her hoof touched something metal and after squinting, she saw that it was gold and in the shape of a horseshoe.

"Zeus' Lightning Bolt," Ahuizotl said as he lifted the necklace with his gloved fingers. "It is mine!"

Rising to her hooves, Rainbow concentrated hard on the blue smudge. She had one shot.

Caballeron groaned as he slowly came to. "But…the magic…how will you…?"

"I will find a way to extract its power," Ahuizotl said, holding it up. "And when I do, no pony will be able to stand in my—YOW!"

The horseshoe struck him in the back, catching him off guard. The bolt fell from his fingers and to the stage floor.

"Don't worry, I have it!" Caballeron said, reaching with his unfrozen front hoof.

Ahuizotl spun around and gasped. "No, you fool!"

The stallion forgot that his unfrozen hoof was also ungloved and he shrieked as the pendant zapped him. Out of impulse, he tossed the bolt aside and Rainbow heard the *clink* as it landed right at her hooves. At the far end of the room, the two heroes were attempting

to untangle themselves from each other. They froze when they saw the pegasus reaching for the bolt.

"Stop!" they cried.

"Don't!" Fluttershy screamed from her hiding place.

"No!"

Rainbow's head shot up at the sound of her mentor's voice behind her.

"Let her do it!"

Smiling, Rainbow picked up the pendant. Upon contact, her vision was cleared and with a powerful surge, her mane whooshed straight upwards. The heroes, Fluttershy, Caballeron and the thugs watched in awe, while Ahuizotl backed away in fear and Daring Do smiled with pride. Rainbow faced her enemies.

"Zeus' Lightning Bolt will never be yours, Ahuizotl," she said as she slipped her head through the chain. "It belongs to me!"

"Who are you?!" Ahuizotl demanded.

Does he seriously not know? She thought as she glanced back at the amazed heroes. *No, I guess that's how this superhero thing works whether you like it or not. Am I a hero now? Well, I do have powers. I should probably say something cool.*

She turned back to him. "I'm the one who's gonna zap ya into oblivion." As she raised the lightning bolt with her hoof and flew upward, a storm cloud formed above her head. "By the power of Zeus, King of the Olympian Gods, I smite at thee!"

Lightning struck at Ahuizotl's feet, making him yelp. Another bolt hit Caballeron's frozen hoof, freeing it but also burning it. As the lightning kept coming, Caballeron rose to his legs and hobbled toward the exit. Daring Do charged for him but a stray bolt forced her to jump out of the way.

"Watch it!" she called from the floor.

"Sorry!" Rainbow shouted.

Ahuizotl slinked along the walls as he maneuvered the lightning. He was almost out when a small whimper caught his ear. Meanwhile, the storm cloud was growing in size and intensity.

"Uh," Rainbow said as she waved the pendant around. "How do you stop this thing?!"

The cloud rumbled and boomed, knocking amphorae off their pedestals. Fortunately, the Masked Matter-Horn was able to encase them with her magic before they hit the ground.

"Dash, stop it!" Daring Do shouted.

"I don't know how!" Rainbow exclaimed, now holding the pendant with both hooves. "It just keeps getting bigger!"

She squeaked as she was suddenly grabbed by the shoulders and spun around. Mistress Mare-velous looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"You're thinkin' too much," she said steadily. "Clear yerr mind, channel yerr emotions. Yerr fear is makin' this storm worse. Just calm yourself, and the storm'll follow."

Rainbow blinked. "How do you…?"

"Just trust me, okay!" She took a deep breath. "Now, close yerr eyes."

Rainbow obeyed.

"As ya breathe in, let all yerr thoughts and fears come together." She inhaled with her. "Now, as ya let yerr breath out, let all yerr thoughts and fears go with it."

Slowly, they both exhaled and Rainbow could feel some of the tension leaving her body. The storm grew quieter.

"Don't fight the storm," Mare-velous said. "Feel it. Become one with it. You are the storm, the storm is you. Its will is yours."

After Rainbow took another deep breath, the cloud slowly shrank into nothingness. She opened her eyes and looked up.

"Wow," she said, looking back at the hero. "How'd ya know that would work?"

Mare-velous smiled. "I've got Demeter's Lasso, remember?"

A heinous laugh made every pony snap their attention towards the entrance. Mare-velous and Rainbow gasped when they saw who was shivering in Ahuizotl's arms.

"Fluttershy!" Rainbow shouted, darting forward.

"Stay back!" Ahuizotl barked, bearing his claws near Fluttershy's belly. "Or I slice this mare open!"

Mare-velous snapped at Rainbow's tail, tugging her back, but the pegasus kept swinging her hooves at the villain. Above, another storm cloud was taking form.

"You hurt her and I'll tear ya limb from limb and fry your insides until they're nothing but ash!"

"Ah," Ahuizotl said with a smirk. "So this mare means something to you." He stiffened as police sirens blared outside. "You try and stop me, and you'll never see this mare again!"

Every pony else stood stiff as Ahuizotl slipped away with Fluttershy.

"He's getting away!" Rainbow shouted. "We have to stop him! We have to save Fluttershy!"

"No," the Matter-Horn said, using her magic to lower her to the floor. "If we try and stop him now, he could hurt that mare."

"She's right," Mare-velous said, spitting out Rainbow's tail. "We can't risk it."

"Then what do we do?" Rainbow demanded. "Just stand here?! We're supposed to be the heroes!"

Mare-velous raised an eyebrow. "We?"

"Well…yeah." She lifted the lightning bolt. "I mean I've got superpowers, right? Doesn't that make me a hero?"

The two heroes glanced at each other.

"She *did* just help us out," the Matter-Horn said. "And she must be of noble heart and mind if the lightning bolt chose her."

Mare-velous scowled at her and then sighed. "Fine, fine. So what do we call ya, uh…?"

Rainbow rubbed her chin. "Uh…let's see. I have Zeus' powers, so wouldn't that make me…Zeus?"

The earth mare folded her hooves. "That's blasphemy. Ya don't hear me callin' myself Demeter just cuz I have her rope, do ya?"

"Okay, okay! Then how about…" She glanced down at her necklace and smiled. "Zap?"

Mare-velous cocked her head. "Kinda short, ain't it?"

Rainbow thought further. "With... *two* P's?"

She shrugged. "Better."

A murmur came from the corridor as a hoard of police ponies rushed in and pointed their guns.

"Police!" a pegasus mare with a fiery mane cried. "Hooves in the air!"

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Well, *you* guys took your sweet time!"

She yelped as Mare-velous punched her sharply in the side.

"Chief Spitfire," the Matter-Horn said, approaching the fiery-maned mare. "I'm afraid the two crooks behind this whole mess have already escaped. One of them has a young pegasus mare hostage."

Chief Spitfire signaled to her cops. "You, you, and you! Search the

hallways! They couldn't've gone far!" As the search party ran off, she glanced around the room. "I see you managed to capture some of the perps though." She noticed the frozen cats. "Some pony get animal control. And a flamethrower." The pegasus emitting sparks made her eyebrows raise. "And who is this?"

"Err," Mare-velous uttered. "This is, um…"

"Name's Zapp," Rainbow replied, proudly placing her hooves on her hips. "With two P's. I'm their new partner."

"Partner?!"

"Partner?" Daring Do said.

Mare-velous face-palmed herself. "How many times do I have to tell y'all that I work alone?!"

The Matter-Horn ignored her and turned back to the chief. "Apparently, the artifact that was unveiled today, Zeus' Lightning Bolt, has chosen a user."

"Excuse me!" Mr. Fetlock cried as he pushed through the police force. "This is my museum! I demand to see…" He gasped when he saw the lightning bolt around Zapp's neck. "Put that necklace down at once, young lady! That is museum property!"

Zapp scowled. "Who ya callin' a *lady* ?"

"With all due respect, Mr. Fetlock," the Matter-Horn said steadily, "but according to legend, the lightning bolt can only be wielded by those chosen by Zeus, and since Zapp here can clearly harness its power, don't you think that means it belongs to her?"

He inhaled sharply. "This is a historical artifact! It was donated to us, it belongs…"

"…to her, Fetlock."

Every pony turned to Daring Do. No pony was more surprised than Rainbow Dash.

"The lightning bolt chose her," Daring said firmly. "She should be allowed to keep it."

"B-B-But," Mr. Fetlock stammered. "The museum…"

She darted her eyes at him. "…will never do business with me again if this mare isn't allowed to have what is rightfully hers!"

Rainbow grinned. "G-Gee, thanks, Daring, I…"

" *Zapp* ," Daring said through her teeth. "Can I have a word with you?"

Gulping, she flew over to her employer, who swung her foreleg around her and turned them away from the crowd so they couldn't be overheard.

"You disobeyed my orders," she said sternly.

Rainbow sighed. "I know, I know, but they needed help and I didn't know what else to do and…"

"I'm glad you did it."

She blinked. "What?"

Daring smirked. "Yeah. I'm glad. Look, Dash… *Zapp* , I…I have a confession." She sighed. "When the bolt chose you, I…I was a little jealous."

Rainbow almost took this as flattery. " *You* were jealous of *me* ?!"

"I've always been the hero. I thought…I really thought the bolt would choose me. But…I know now why it chose you instead." She looked at her sincerely. "You're loyal, even when your help is unwanted. You're courageous, even when you know you can't win, you never give up. Back in the temple, you knew you couldn't possibly defeat Ahuizotl on your own, but you went and tried anyway. You picked up that bolt so you could help me. Me…well, I only picked it up so I could be the hero.

"But there's more to being a hero than being the one to get in on all

the action, or to have all the glory. You reminded me of that." She hung her head. "I wish I could've been a better mentor for you."

Grinning, Rainbow put her wing around her. "You *have* been. You still are. No matter how bossy you can get, boss, you'll always be a hero to me."

Daring returned her smile and embraced her.

"Hate to break up the sentimental fluff," Mare-velous said as she hopped onto the stage, "but we've gotta find that feline fiend and rescue Fluttershy." She glared at the thugs who were writhing in their bounds. "The more ya struggle, the tighter it gets."

The short, rotund thug wheezed. "She's right. Stop!"

"Now," she said, stooping down to their eyelevel. "Why don't ya be good lil' boys and tell us where we can find Ahuizotl?"

"We'll never tell!" the tallest thug cried.

She smirked. "Ya sure about that?"

The rope glowed brighter and all three of them blurted out, "He's hiding out at the abandoned cat food factory!"

"Figures," Daring groaned. "He just can't stay away from cats."

"Wait, why did we say that?" the tall thug asked.

Mare-velous took one end of the rope. "No pony can lie to Ole Bessie."

With a sharp tug, the rope whirled the crooks out of its hold. Crying out, they dropped to the floor in dizziness.

"Book 'em," Spitfire told her cops. "We'll get some ponies down to the factory."

"No," the Matter-Horn said. "The sirens will alert Ahuizotl. My partners and I will take care of it."

Mare-velous groaned. "I'm no pony's partner!"

Spitfire nodded. "Okay. Your plans have worked before, Matter-Horn, so I trust you. Still, if you need any backup, I'll park some units down the block."

"Thank you, chief. I'll keep that in mind." The Matter-Horn turned to the other supers. "You two coming?"

"Heck, yeah!" Zapp said, pumping her hoof.

Mare-velous sighed as she picked up her horseshoes. "I'm only doin' this to save that mare. Afterwards, I don't expect y'all to call on me for help again, okay?"

"Come on," the Matter-Horn said, nudging her playfully. "You have to admit we make a pretty good team."

She glared at her. "Don't touch me."

The rope snapped for emphasis.

The police spread out to make way for the three heroes.

"Did I do something to make her mad?" Zapp whispered to the Matter-Horn. "Or is she always this grumpy?"

"Don't worry about her," the Matter-Horn said. "She appreciates the help. She just doesn't want to admit it."

Origins: Part 5

I'm just gonna skip the excuses and go straight to the chapter.

A new thing I'm trying for this story is to put a quote at the beginning of each chapter, one that encompasses each chapter's theme (you'll notice I've added them to previous chapters).

" *It's hard to get people to overcome the thought that they have to take care of themselves first. It's hard to get players to give in to the group and become selfless as opposed to selfish."*

-Isaiah Thomas

In her apartment, Rarity was admiring herself in the mirror. She was wearing the indigo jumpsuit with the diamond pattern, now with the two pink diamond bracelets on her front hooves.

"What do you think?" she asked Coco who was sitting on the couch, watching her.

"They're lovely, Rarity," she replied. "The bracelets go well with the suit. But…I thought you said accessories like this could be caught in machinery or something."

"True," Rarity said, lifting one hoof to admire the bracelet. "But these accessories are at least removable, so the wearer can take them off when necessary."

"I suppose. But how are you going to reproduce these? I mean the bracelets alone were expensive enough. And how often do you find pink diamonds?"

She turned to Coco. "They don't have to *all* be real diamonds,

darling. Now that we have the gems, we could have replicas made for the real…"

She was cut off as several glowing duplicates of the bracelets suddenly appeared and were hovering in front of her. Coco shrieked and pressed herself against the back of the couch.

"What in Equestria?!" Rarity exclaimed.

"How did you do that?!" her friend asked, pointing to her horn. "Your horn's not glowing!"

Rarity looked back in the mirror. "I don't know. All I did was suggest replicating these bracelets when…"

The bracelets glowed and more duplicates appeared.

"Eep!" she screamed, waving at the floating bracelets. "No, no! Go away! I don't need them anymore!"

As soon as she said this, the duplicate diamonds poofed into nothingness. Still shivering, Coco inched herself forward to the edge of the couch. Rarity held out her hooves as she gazed in wonder at the bracelets.

"W-What's going on?" Coco said.

Rarity gulped. "I don't know, but…I believe…" She looked to her wall, which had a long crack reaching from the floor to the ceiling. "I want to try something."

She closed her eyes, and what happened next caused Coco to gasp. A glowing pink concrete edger appeared, along with a glowing pink bucket. Rarity opened her eyes and watched in awe as pink goop splashed out of the bucket and onto the wall. The edger smoothed the substance out along the crack.

"H-How are you doing that?" Coco asked, gripping the arm of the couch.

"I just," Rarity said, smiling, "thought of how I've always wanted to fix that dreadful crack and…it just happened!" She looked down at the

bracelets, which were glowing along with the magical objects. "These bracelets…I think…I think they're doing this!"

Her friend's eyes widened. "They must be magic!"

Rarity laughed. "And to think these were being sold in a mere jewelry store! These might've belonged to a wizard!"

The pink edger, bucket and goop vanished and a pink, conical wizard hat appeared on Rarity's head.

"What happened to the tools?" Coco asked.

"I think," Rarity said, poking at the hat, which felt completely solid, "that if I simply think of something, the bracelets make these, err… magical constructs appear accordingly, but…" The hat vanished. "I'm not sure the bracelets can project more than one thought at once."

"What do you suppose they are? I mean where did they come from?"

"I'm not sure." Glancing at one of her naked dress dummies, Rarity grinned. "What I *do* know," she said, pointing her glowing bracelet towards her roles of fabric, "is that these bracelets," magical pink scissors appeared as they cut the fabric into large pieces, "are going to make our jobs," the scissors then vanished and were replaced with a magical needle and thread, " *much* simpler."

"You know?" the Matter-Horn said as she and Zapp flew over Maretropolis. "It's nice to have some pony else flying alongside me for once."

Zapp cocked her head. "I'm sure there are plenty of pegasi in this city who would fly with you."

The alicorn smirked. "Yeah, but I'm a hero. They're too…intimidated to fly next to me all chummy-like."

"Must get kinda lonely up here, then."

"Yeah," she said with a sigh, looking down at the city. "But hey, it's not like many pegasi can catch up with me anyway. I'm the fastest flyer in this city."

"Oh yeah?" Zapp said, smiling mischievously. "Bet I can fly faster."

Matter-Horn laughed as she nudged her shoulder playfully. "You wish!"

"Wanna race and find out?"

"Hey!" Mare-velous called from a rooftop below. "If y'all are done fraternizin' up there, we got a mare to save!"

Zapp groaned as she flew down to Mare-velous' level and began following the earth mare as she used her lasso to swing from building to building, occasionally leaping over smaller gaps.

"Things would go along a lot faster," Zapp said, "if you had just let Matter-Horn carry ya."

Mare-velous huffed. "I don't need any pony carryin' me! I got my pride!"

She huffed as she jumped off the building and grabbed a hanging flagpole. After two swing-arounds, she let go and landed on her back hooves on the roof of the next building.

"Besides," she called back to Zapp as she continued running, "we wouldn't be rescuin' Fluttershy to begin with if ya'd been more subtle back at the museum!"

"What are ya talking about?"

Skidding to a halt, Mare-velous turned around to face the rookie. "First rule of bein' a superhero. *Never* ," she said, poking her harshly in the chest, "reveal *anythin'* 'bout your personal life! Meanin', if some pony ya care about gets captured, do *not* let the villain know ya know her, *Rainbow Dash* !"

Zapp flew back an inch in shock. "I…" She coughed. "I have no idea what you're…"

"Oh, *come on* !" Mare-velous said, rolling her eyes. "The rainbow mane, the blue coat… Ya haven't even changed outta yerr suit! You're obviously that old friend of Fluttershy's workin' for Daring Do. Did ya really think I wouldn't recognize ya without the glasses?"

She poked the space between her eyes for emphasis. Blinking back, Zapp glared at her angrily.

"Oh yeah? Well I'll have you know Ahuizotl's seen me hundreds of times, and he *still* has no idea who I… Hey, wait a minute! How'd ya know Fluttershy and I were old friends?"

Mare-velous bit her lip. "Uh…well, ya obviously knew her, so I…just assumed that…"

After a long period of squinting, Zapp let out a gasp. " *You're* that roommate! Apple…something. Can't believe I didn't recognize your weirdo accent before!"

"Ugh!" Mare-velous groaned as she slapped herself in the forehead. "Knew I shouldn't've let ya know I know ya!"

"Well. Now I know that you know that I know, ya know." Zapp frowned. "Wait. That can't be right."

"Yes, yes, yes," the Matter-Horn said, landing between them. "We all know each other. Now come on, Applejack, Miss Dash, we've got work to do."

They stared after her as she walked on.

"Hang on there!" Mare-velous said, galloping after her. "How'd ya know my name? I didn't mention it!"

"Oh please," Matter-Horn said bluntly. "I've known who you were for weeks."

That made the earth mare stop in her tracks. "H-How? I mean…I'm not any pony important. I'm just a…"

"Apple vendor?" The alicorn nodded. "I know that too."

Mare-velous' jaw dropped. "H-How?"

Turning back to her, Matter-Horn replied, "You told me."

"But I…I didn't mention…"

"You didn't have to. When you said you had inherited your rope from your father, you told me all I needed to know. I simply had to locate the previous owner of Demeter's Lasso, and the fact that I knew your hometown made it all the easier to find the news story on your parents. The Round-Up Rangers, right? I see vigilantism runs in the family.

"When they were killed, a young filly that was said to be their daughter was found at the scene." Matter-Horn looked sincerely at the earth mare. "That filly was you, wasn't it?"

Mare-velous said nothing. Then the Matter-Horn turned her attention to Zapp.

"She's right, by the way. The glasses don't help."

Zapp blushed in embarrassment. "Alright, alright. So you know who we are."

"Yeah," Mare-velous said, crossing her hooves. "But we still don't know who *you* are."

"Please," Matter-Horn said, smirking. "Do you really think I'd make it that easy?" She opened her wings. "Now, let's quit wasting time, shall we? Like you said, we've got a mare to save."

As she took off, Mare-velous watched her with a growl.

"Smart aleck," she said under her breath.

The abandoned cat food factory was large and quite empty, save for the rusted old machinery and the piles of empty tuna cans. Ahuizotl was petting his fluffy white cat that was perched on a conveyer belt that no longer worked. Caballeron's burnt hoof was wrapped in a

bandage, while his frozen hoof was thawing over a lit candle. Fluttershy was bound to a chair in the corner of the room, shivering with fright.

"I'll curse that mare for what she did to my hoof!" Caballeron said with a grunt. "Why didn't you tell me this city was overrun with heroes?"

"How was I to know?" Ahuizotl replied in annoyance. "You think you have problems? That mare froze my precious felines!" He turned back to his cat. "At least I still have you, Mr. Fluffy-Paws."

Mr. Fluffy-Paws purred in response. Ahuizotl was terrifying, but Fluttershy couldn't help but appreciate how well he treated his pets. Her fear returned when she felt Caballeron's eyes on her.

"What is the point in trading the mare for the bolt?" he asked his boss. "Even if they give it to us, we can't use it."

He held up his bandaged hoof for emphasis. Ahuizotl chuckled as he picked up his cat.

"This isn't just about the bolt anymore," he said. "The blond one has Demeter's Lasso."

"So?" Caballeron said, raising his eyebrow. "We can't use that either."

"Not if we find the *rest* of the Olympian gods' gifts. According to legend, he who has all twelve will be able to harness all their powers, *regardless* of being chosen!" He continued to stroke his cat. "With the bolt *and* the rope, I will be two steps closer to achieving ultimate power."

"Mmm-hmm." Caballeron appeared uninterested. "I still get paid, don't I?"

Ahuizotl smiled. "Do your job well, and I might make you a king once I take over the world. Pick any country you like and it'll be yours. Now," he said, putting Mr. Fluffy-Paws on the floor, "stay right here, my pet, while I go find you a treat."

As his boss began taking his leave, Caballeron glanced at Fluttershy with interest.

"You know," he called to his employer, "our prisoner is quite beautiful."

Ahuizotl paused and turned around to study their captive. "I suppose. For pony standards."

"In fact," Caballeron said, smiling wickedly, "our heroes may not appear for a while. You wouldn't mind if I…had a little fun, first?"

Fluttershy squeaked at the thug's insinuation. Her hooves were shaking, but she tried to calm herself down with deep breaths.

Mustn't get angry, mustn't get angry…

"Bah," Ahuizotl said, waving his paw as he left the room. "I don't care what you do with her. Just be sure to leave her in one piece."

Caballeron chuckled as he gently rubbed his now fully-thawed hoof. "You are too kind, Boss."

Fluttershy stiffened as he began stalking towards her. She didn't want him to touch her. If she simply…let her temper loose, she could get out of this. But she also didn't want to risk revealing her secret. Plus, if she got angry, there was no telling what she would do.

With every step he made towards her, it became harder and harder to control herself.

Then Caballeron stopped and looked down to see Mr. Fluffy-Paws brushing and purring against his leg. He growled in annoyance.

"Get off me, you little rat!"

With a hard kick, he sent the cat flying across the room, making him cry out. Fluttershy gasped as she watched the kitty hit the wall.

"Now," Caballeron said, turning back to her. "Where were we?"

Clenching her hooves, Fluttershy glared at her captor. "You

shouldn't have done that."

"Done what?"

"That kitty," she said, her voice growing dangerously low. "He didn't do anything to you."

Caballeron laughed. "What do you care about what I do to a little animal?" He raised his bandaged hoof to stroke her cheek. "It's what I'm going to do to you that you should be worried about."

With a furious growl, Fluttershy snapped her teeth at his hoof, forcing him to retract it. Still, he laughed.

"You are more fiery than you look." He grabbed her face in his hooves. "This is going to be fun."

As he leaned forward, Fluttershy's eyes turned red. "You," she said, as the muscles in her legs grew bigger, "are not," the ropes cracked as she grew, "a very," and then snapped, "nice…"

Caballeron cried out as she kicked him hard in the stomach. He fell on his back and looked up in shock to see that the mare had doubled in size and her eyes were glowing red.

"PONY!" she shouted in a deep, booming voice as she crushed the chair beneath her.

"What's all this noise?" Ahuizotl asked as he returned. Then he looked up, stiffened, and said in a squeaky voice, " *El diablo.* "

The three heroes were now perched on a rooftop, watching the outside of the abandoned cat food factory.

"So what are we sitting around for?" Zapp demanded. "We gotta get in there!"

Mare-velous grabbed the pegasus' tail in her mouth before she could zip off.

"We can't just rush in there," the Matter-Horn said. "We need a plan."

"For once," Mare-velous said, spitting out the rainbow tail, "I agree with ya."

"Zapp," Matter-Horn said, turning to the pegasus, "you've dealt with Ahuizotl before. Other than those cats, does he have any other minions?"

"Not usually," Zapp replied. "Those four felines you froze at the museum were pretty much it. Well, he also has this fluffy white kitten, but you shouldn't worry about him as long as you don't get close enough for him to scratch your eyes out."

"So, assuming Ahuizotl hasn't hired any pony else, it's just him, Caballeron, and the kitten."

"Sounds simple enough," Mare-velous said, tightening her rope in her grasp. "That *Cabby-leer-own* fella's mine. I didn't like what he said about mares bein' weak an' helpless."

"In that case, I'll take Ahuizotl."

"What about me?" Zapp asked. "What do I do?"

"You keep lookout," Mare-velous said.

"What?! But I've got the Lightning Bolt…"

"Don't be like that," the Matter-Horn said, nudging the earth mare with her wing. "Zapp, you find Fluttershy and get her out. If there are any extra obstacles, you take care of them."

"And whatever ya do," Mare-velous said warningly, "don't get caught up in the action. Gettin' Fluttershy outta there unscathed is our priority."

Zapp crossed her hooves. "She's my friend too, ya know? Ya really think I'd abandon her?"

"I don't know what ya'd do, but you're new at this, and that fancy

display back at the museum nearly got us all obliterated."

"Hey! Gimme a break!" She held up the bolt. "It's not like this thing comes with an instruction manual!"

Mare-velous put her hooves on her hips as she stared up at her. "Then maybe ya should consider takin' a load-off until ya know how to control that…"

"Shush!" the Matter-Horn whispered. "Stop bickering, you two! Remember why we're here. If you both care for Fluttershy, you'll work together to get her back!"

Crossing their hooves, the two of them turned away from each other with a collective *huff!*

"Now," the Matter-Horn said as she studied the building. "I see an open window up there. If I remember the blueprints of this factory correctly, there should be a catwalk there for you to land on, Mare-velous. Zapp, you come in through the skylight. I'll see if there's an opening on the other side."

"What if there isn't an opening?" Zapp asked.

The alicorn smirked as her horn glowed red. "I'll *make* one." She crouched down. "Alright. On three, we all move in. One…two…"

A loud crash interrupted her. The ground shook, causing the Matter-Horn and Mare-velous to fall backward. A roar rang out and the heroes watched in horror as an enormous yellow monster stomped out of the factory.

It looked like a pony, one the size of an elephant, with thick, muscular legs and broad shoulders. On its back was a tiny pair of wings that didn't look strong enough to carry its body into the air. It had a flowing pink mane and tail, and glowing red eyes that were narrow in fury. It was barely dressed in some sort of white garment, which was torn at the back and the legs. The creature roared again as it began tromping through the streets, crushing parked cars beneath its hooves. The heroes could do nothing but gape.

"Well," Mare-velous said. "There's somethin' ya don't see every

day."

The Mater-Horn looked to Zapp. "You didn't tell us Ahuizotl had a monster working for him!"

"He doesn't!" Zapp insisted. "At least, I've never seen him with a…"

"Hang on a minute," Mare-velous said, holding up her hoof.

As the monster knocked over a lamp pole, Mare-velous squinted at its flank. When she saw three pink butterflies, she gasped.

"That cutie mark!" she said, pointing. "That's Fluttershy's cutie mark!"

Zapp squinted in the indicated direction. "Hey, you're right!"

"You don't think…?"

The heroes looked at each other in realization.

"What did that monster *do* to her?!" Mare-velous exclaimed.

"I don't know," Zapp said, pounding her hooves together, "but I'm gonna pound the stuffing out of that fiendish feline until he tells us how we can change her back!"

"But we can't just leave Fluttershy wanderin' about like that! Normally, she wouldn't hurt a fly, but like this, there's no tellin' what she'll do!"

"We'll need back-up," the Matter-Horn said, pressing her hoof to her ear. "Chief Spitfire, do you copy?"

" *Matter-Horn!* " the Chief shouted through her earpiece. " *There's some kind of monster heading down Fillydelphia Street!* "

"We noticed. We believe it's the hostage Ahuizotl was holding. Order your officers not to shoot her. She's just an innocent under the influence of some spell or potion. We're not sure yet, but we're gonna find out. Right now, you're going to need a couple of ponies to pick up Ahuizotl and his posse."

" *Copy that! Spitfire, out!* "

The Matter-Horn lowered her hoof and turned to her associates. "I'll hold off Fluttershy. You two get in there, capture Ahuizotl and get him to tell you how to cure her."

"Don't hurt her," Mare-velous said, her eyes pleading. "She doesn't know what she's doin'."

"Don't worry," the alicorn said as she spread out her wings. "The worse she'll get is a little frostbite."

As she took off, Mare-velous let out a sigh of relief. "Thought she'd never leave. Now," she said, twirling her rope around her hoof in thought, "if we time this carefully, we can get the drop on…"

"I'm gonna make those jerks pay!" Zapp shouted.

Before Mare-velous could stop her, the pegasus zoomed into the air and crashed through the roof of the factory. The earth mare groaned as she telekinetically swung her rope in the air.

"Amateurs."

She clutched the rope in her hooves and jumped off the building. Thanks to the rope's magic, she was able to swing to the next building without needing to tie the rope to anything. She dropped into the open window the Matter-Horn had pointed out and landed on a catwalk.

"At least she was right about the landin'," she muttered under her breath.

Down below, the hideout was in shambles. Cans were scattered all around, the machinery was smashed to bits and Caballeron lay unconscious on the floor. Zapp had Ahuizotl by the shoulders, a static cloud forming above her head.

"What did you do to her?!" she demanded, shaking him hard. "Was it some spell?! Some potion?! What gives ya the right to turn an innocent pony into a…?"

"Newbie!" Mare-velous said, sliding down her rope and landing next to her compadre. "Ya only use force in an interrogation as a last resort. Sometimes," she said, pushing Zapp off the villain, "all ya need is a little," the lasso wrapped itself around Ahuizotl, "tact."

He squeaked as the rope yanked itself tight.

"Try not to struggle," Mare-velous said, leaning toward him. "It'll only get tighter. Ya can't lie either, so ya better answer my questions truthfully, or else Bessie here might get a tad," she tugged on the rope for emphasis, "playful. Get the picture?"

Ahuizotl nodded weakly.

"Good. Now, answer me this." Her eyes narrowed. "What did ya do to Fluttershy?"

"Nothing!" he insisted. He yelped as his bounds glowed and tightened. "Alright, alright, alright! We kidnapped her and tied her to a chair! But that was it!"

The rope lit up again and squeezed.

"Ole Bessie doesn't seem to agree with ya," Mare-velous said.

"Caballeron took an interest in her!" Ahuizotl squeaked. "So I…err… left him alone with her for a few minutes."

Zapp scowled. "Why you disgusting little…"

Mare-velous grabbed her hoof in midair before it could strike. "And then what? Did ya decide turnin' her into a monster would be more fun?"

"I don't know what happened!" Ahuizotl said, shaking his head desperately. "I wasn't out of the room for long, but I heard a crash and came back and…I saw…"

Mare-velous telekinetically used the rope to bring him closer so that their noses were touching. "What did ya see?"

He quivered as his eyes went wide in terror. Then he said, in a voice

barely above a whisper, " *El diablo* ."

"What?"

"He means a demon," Zapp said. "I think he means Fluttershy."

Ahuizotl nodded. "The mare…was not a mare any more. She had… she had transformed! I don't know how, but…she started destroying everything and knocked my friend out! Then she went out through the wall over there!" He tilted his head towards the monstrous opening in the brick wall. "That's all I know, I swear!"

Mare-velous blinked back in surprise. "Wait. Ya mean to tell me that…ya had nothin' to do with Fluttershy becomin' a monster?"

"What would I gain from turning some random mare into a monster?"

The hero glanced down at the rope and saw that it was perfectly still. "I believe ya."

She then kicked him in the head, knocking him out cold.

"No fair!" Zapp said. "Why wouldn't ya let *me* hit him?!"

"Ya would've lost control of yourself," Mare-velous said casually.

"Then why did *you* get to hit him?!"

"I needed my rope back," she said as the rope magically unraveled from the now unconscious villain. "So," she said, stepping towards the opening Fluttershy had made, "whatever happened to Fluttershy, Ahuizotl had nothing to do with it."

"But if it wasn't Ahuizotl," Zapp said, hovering over her, "what made her go all crazy?"

"I don't know." Mare-velous ran her hoof along the edges of the hole. "Ya've known her longer. Has she ever…done anything like this in the past?"

"Nope. Not that I'm aware of, anyway." Zapp looked down at her

pendant. "Maybe…maybe she came into contact with an artifact like the bolt or the rope. By accident, I mean."

The earth mare shook her head. "Didn't see anythin' on her that looked like some magical artifact. If it was anythin' like our artifacts, it'd still be on her."

"Then maybe she was bitten by a radioactive…gorilla or something?"

"Whatever happened to her," Mare-velous said, looking out at the shambled street, "we gotta stop her before she destroys the whole city."

Back at Rarity's apartment, the unicorn was still experimenting with her new magical bracelets. While she worked at her sewing machine, a glowing pink replica of the machine was sewing a dress of its own.

"Can you believe it, Coco?" Rarity asked, spinning around excitedly to face her friend. "These bracelets can do absolutely anything!"

Coco nodded hesitantly. "They, um…certainly make a… *interesting* accessory for the jumpsuit."

"Oh, but darling, don't you see?" She stood up. "This goes *beyond* a simple jumpsuit line! Why," she said, looking down at her glowing wrists, "with these bracelets, we could open up our own boutique! These beautiful accessories will help us work at the rate of *ten* seamstresses! Oh, Coco!" She grabbed her friend by the shoulders. "We could be the biggest thing the fashion world has ever seen!"

Coco stared at her friend, then the bracelets, and then slowly backed out of the unicorn's grasp.

"Well, um," she stammered, "w-with those bracelets to help you, I…I don't think you need me to…"

Rarity frowned. "Oh, Coco, don't be like that." She lifted her friend's chin. "You're my best friend. I'll *always* need you. I mean just

because these bracelets can do a lot, doesn't mean I can't have you to help with sales and designs and…"

The two mares jumped as the ground suddenly shook.

"What in the…?" Rarity said.

The ground shook again, this time knocking over one of Rarity's dress dummies.

"Is it an earthquake?" Coco asked in fright.

Another thump caused the two of them to leap two feet off the floor.

"No earthquake I know is ever this—EEP!" She yelped at the next thump. "Discontinuous!"

The next thump was accompanied with a roar.

"That came from outside," Coco said, rushing to the window.

"What do you see?" Rarity said, following her.

The mares gasped when they saw a giant, buff, yellow pony stomping through the streets.

"What *is* that thing?!" Coco squealed.

"I don't know," Rarity said, scrunching her hoof in disgust. "But *oh* ! Would you look at those rags it's wearing? Positively *ghastly* !"

"Look!" The earth mare pointed at a purple blur in the sky. "The Masked Matter-Horn!"

"Where?!"

Rarity pressed her face against the glass to get a better look. Sure enough, the hero swooped down and shot her ice beams at the monster, who roared in response.

"Oh my! I've never seen her this close!" Rarity said. "Now *there's* a mare with style! Just look at the way her electric blue collar compliments her magenta jumpsuit! And those highlights, aw!

Remind me to have my mane dyed like that in the future. Oh, she'll stop that ruffian for sure!"

The Matter-Horn froze the monster's hooves. For a moment, it looked like the creature was stuck, but with a loud growl, it grew larger, shattering through its ice shackles.

"Did you see that?" Coco asked. "It got bigger!"

"Don't worry," Rarity said. "The Masked Matter-Horn's vanquished larger brutes before. She's sure to…" She gasped when she realized the hero was hovering right outside her window, her back to them. "There she is! Yoo hoo, Miss Matter-Horn!"

The hero tried her heat ray, but when it hit the skin on the monster's leg, it didn't leave a mark. All it did was cause the creature to grow even larger. Annoyed at the alicorn, it picked up a parked car in its mouth and hurled it at her. The Matter-Horn zipped out of the way, not realizing that the car was now headed straight for the two mares at the window.

Shrieking, Rarity ducked below the window, covering her hooves over her head as the car crashed through the glass. She waited for the blow, but after a minute of silence, she opened one eye in confusion. To her amazement, she found herself encased in a pink bubble, courtesy of the bracelets, no doubt.

Sighing in relief, she willed the shield away.

"Well," she said, rising and straightening out her jumpsuit. "That certainly was a close one, wasn't it, Coco?"

But when Rarity looked up, she found a large gaping hole where her friend had stood a minute ago.

"Coco?!" she called, searching the room frantically.

She gasped when she saw the crashed car on the other side of the room, leaning vertically against the wall. Sticking out from beneath it was a twitching cream-colored hoof.

"Coco!"

As she rushed forward, the bracelets constructed a giant crowbar to lift the car from its victim. Coco was crumpled against the wall, her legs spread out crookedly, her back left leg bleeding. Rarity knelt down to her and was relieved to see that she was still breathing.

"Hang on, darling," she said, using her magic to levitate a piece of fabric over to use as a bandage. "I'm here."

She tried to lift the leg so she could wrap it, but a moan from her friend made her abandon the idea. Instead, she simply draped the fabric over the cut on her leg and put direct pressure on it with her hooves. Using her horn, she brought out her cell phone and dialed. She listened to the ringing in anticipation.

" *We're sorry* ," a computerized voice said. " *But the number you've dialed is unavailable at the moment.* "

"Unavailable?!" Rarity shouted as she angrily threw down her phone. "How can the emergency line be *unavailable* ?!"

It then occurred to her that the current monster attack had probably caused the line to be busy. Coco stirred as she tiredly opened her eyes.

"Coco!" Rarity exclaimed. "Thank goodness you're alright! Can you move?"

"Not…really," Coco said, wincing. "My leg…"

"Yes, yes, of course. Don't move anything if it hurts." The unicorn hung her head in shame. "Oh, Coco, darling, forgive me."

Her friend blinked. "For…what? You didn't…throw the car…"

"No, but I…I could've helped you. I could've summoned that shield and saved us both, but instead…" She sighed. "I only saved myself."

"Not…your fault. It was…the heat of the…" Coco grunted. "… moment."

"That doesn't make it any better!" She gently laid her hoof on her friend's shoulder. "You're my dearest friend, Coco. I…I should've

immediately thought of you first! I mean…I find these magical bracelets and I couldn't even…"

Another crash from outside caused her to spin her head around. Using the bracelets to make a temporary bandage for Coco's wound, Rarity stood and rushed back to the window. It appeared that the monster had grown twice in size, and the Matter-Horn's blasts were futile. There were gaping holes in the other buildings, some ponies dangling from them. The hero had to momentarily abandon her attack on the creature to help the civilians, but with every minute the Matter-Horn ignored the monster, the more damage it made.

She can't stop it alone , Rarity thought.

She glanced down at her bracelets, then at her jumpsuit. Upon turning, she noticed a swatch of indigo fabric, left over from the jumpsuit she was wearing.

Her bracelets lit up as an idea occurred to her. Coco's magical bandage disappeared as a pink pair of scissors appeared over the indigo fabric and began cutting into it.

"Wha…?" Coco said, breathing unsteadily. "What are you…doing?"

"First," Rarity said as she oversaw the cutting of the fabric, "I'm going to get you to a hospital."

"How…how are you…?"

Once she was finished cutting, Rarity willed the scissors to vanish and then made a stretcher appear beneath Coco. The unicorn then turned around, her magic holding up a newly-made indigo mask.

"Second," she said, placing the mask over her eyelids, "I'm going to ensure that that *brute* does *not* get away with this!"

Sorry. But I had so much more planned it made sense to end the chapter here. Plus, after months of waiting, you deserved an update.

Origins: Part 6

" *Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."*

-Andrew Carnegie

Pinkamena was waiting in line at a coffee shop, trying to explain her situation to her father on the phone.

"Yes, Pa, I'm sorry I…" She winced as she listened to his angry voice. "I know, I know! I said I'd do it, but…well there was this magician robber and a flying alicorn with ice powers…no, I'm not making this up! Seriously, there's this superhero and…"

"Um, ma'am?" the barista asked.

"Hang on." Pinkamena put her hoof over her cell. "Just gimme the most caffeinated thing ya got, with extra, extra whipped cream." She returned to the phone. "Look, the rocks are fine, I managed to get them all organized in some new crates, but the store was closed and I can't make the delivery until morning. But I'm staying at a motel and—thanks," she said as she tossed the barista a bit for the drink, "I promise I won't mess up again and…"

The ground shook, causing her to drop her cell. Pinkamena spun towards the store's front window in time to see the purple blur that was the Masked Matter-Horn. Excited, she picked up her phone.

"Pa, I'm gonna have to call ya back." She snatched up her paper cup of coffee. "I'm taking this to-go!"

"Wait, miss!" the barista called, holding up a plastic lid. "You forgot to put a lid on…"

But Pinkamena didn't hear her as she threw the glass door open. Fluttershy was now ten times the size of a pony and citizens were scattering about in fear as she left deep impressions in the street. Pinkamena sipped her coffee in wonder, not caring that whipped cream was getting all over her face. She watched as Zapp flew in, followed by Mistress Mare-velous, who was swinging in from the rooftops.

"Did you find out what caused this?" the Matter-Horn asked them.

"Ahuizotl had nothing to do with this!" Zapp said.

"What?!" the alicorn said, dodging an incoming lamppost. "Are you sure?"

Mare-velous grunted as she landed on a balcony near where the two other heroes were hovering. "Unless Ole Bessie's lost her touch, he was tellin' the truth."

"Then…what caused all this?"

"I don't know," Mare-velous said as her rope began twirling into a larger loop, "but until we figure it out, we gotta get Fluttershy under wraps."

She mentally shot the lasso at Fluttershy, who wailed as the rope tightened around her hooves. Losing her balance, she tipped over and landed on the street with a thud.

"Woo hoo!" Pinkamena cheered from the sidelines. "Go Power Ponies!"

Zapp turned to look at the pink pony. "Hey," she said, pointing her hoof at her, "I *like* that!" She turned back to the other heroes. "That can be our team name!"

"Does have a nice," the Matter-Horn said, lowering to the ground, "alliterative ring to it."

"Naw-uh!" Mare-velous said, leaping down to her side. "We agreed we were gonna do this one job, and that was it! We're not formin' some…superhero *conglomo* or whatever ya call it! Besides, it's a

stupid name."

"So," Zapp said, glancing at the struggling giant, "what are we gonna do about Fluttershy?"

"I, um," the Matter-Horn said, biting her lip, "know some pony who can run some tests to see what might have triggered the transformation and, maybe, find a cure. If we can just get her over to Sparkle Labs, we could…"

But she trailed off when she saw that Fluttershy was growing once again. The rope pulled tighter on her legs, but Fluttershy just kept getting bigger.

"Oh boy," Mare-velous said. "If she doesn't stop that, the rope's gonna cut right through her…"

Whatever she was going to say, it didn't happen, for Fluttershy's growing legs were too much for the rope to handle. She broke through her bounds with a loud *snap!* Mare-velous' jaw dropped in horror.

At that moment, a truck with a radiation symbol painted on its side was coming down the street. Fluttershy stopped it with her hooves. The driver jumped out just in time before Fluttershy threw it over her shoulder. The truck crashed into the building next to the coffee shop and green liquid burst out. None of the toxic waste hit any pony, but a single drop landed in Pinkamena's coffee, unbeknownst to her.

As Fluttershy stomped down the street, Mare-velous rushed to the remnants of her rope.

"Bessie," she breathed, falling to her knees. "She…she snapped Ole Bessie! No pony's *ever* manage to break her like that!"

"Look," the Matter-Horn said, pointing.

Despite being broken, the rope was still glowing. Its pieces were slithering towards each other.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," the Matter-Horn said, giving Mare-velous an assuring pat on the back. "Looks like

Ole Bessie's gonna fix herself."

The earth mare let out a sigh of relief as the pieces reconnected and magically stitched the tear between them.

"Really had me worried there, partner," Mare-velous whispered as she cradled the rope in her hooves.

"Whatever's doing this to Fluttershy," the Matter-Horn said, looking to where the monster had gone, "it must be some powerful magic to break through Demeter's Lasso. And it seems every attack we throw at her just makes her bigger and bigger."

"I thought she looked bigger."

"So wait," Zapp said. "If we can't attack her, and we can't hold her with something as powerful as Demeter's Lasso, a gift from a *god* , how are we supposed to stop her from destroying the city?"

"Obviously," the Matter-Horn replied, "we can't contain her while she is in this state. If we only knew what caused her transformation, we could…"

She was cut off as a pink and blue blur whizzed above her and her associates.

"Avast, ye scurvy scum!" a mare's voice hollered.

Zapp blinked as the blur disappeared around a street corner. "Err… did you girls just see a masked unicorn whiz by on a pink flying carpet?"

"I saw it," Mare-velous said, "but I don't believe it."

"She went in the same direction as Fluttershy," the Matter-Horn said, flapping her wings. "We'd better see what this is about."

As the heroes chased after the monster, Pinkamena sighed in sadness.

"Being a superhero and fighting bad guys sure must be fun," she said, raising her drink to her lips, failing to notice that it was now

glowing green. "Wish I had superpowers. That would make my life *loads* more fun."

With a long chug, she emptied the contents of the cup.

"Hmm," she said, smacking her lips. "That tasted a bit…odd."

Her stomach started to grumble. She put her hoof to it with a groan.

"Ohhhhh. I don't feel so good."

A sudden shudder ran up her spine, making her drop the empty cup as she stiffened. Her hooves started shaking, followed by her legs, then her tail. Soon, her whole body was shaking uncontrollably, making her mane and tail bounce into curls. When she tried speaking, her voice was jittery from the vibration.

"W-W-Whaaaat's g-g-goooooiiiiing ooooooonnnnn?"

Inside the coffee shop, the barista saw the pink mare shuddering and assumed she was having a fit or something. Opening the door, she called out to her.

"Hey, ma'am? Are you o—?"

She never got her answer, for the pink mare suddenly zipped off in the form of a long, pink streak.

By the time the heroes got to Fluttershy, she was chewing on a fire hydrant, leaving a spout of water in the sidewalk. Rarity was hovering above her on her flying carpet.

"Your city-destroying days are over, ruffian!" she said, pointing her glowing bracelet at the creature. "This is for Coco!"

A giant pink mallet appeared above Fluttershy's head. Zapp gasped.

"Wait!" she shouted, soaring towards Rarity.

As soon as the mallet was formed, the flying carpet vanished from

beneath Rarity's hooves. Looking down, she said, "Oh dear."

She screamed as she fell. Zapp swooped down and caught her in her hooves. Meanwhile, the giant mallet poofed out of existence.

"You can't just whack my friend like that!" Zapp yelled as she placed Rarity on the ground. "Just who do you think you are?"

Stammering, Rarity tried to come up with an alias. "I'm Ra…Ra… Radiance! Yes, Radiance! Wielder of the…the…" She held up her bracelets. " *Pièces de Diamants* !"

The pegasus blinked. "The who and the what now?"

Radiance rolled her eyes. "I don't expect *you* to understand, you…" She looked her over. "What in the *world* have you done to that suit?"

Zapp looked down to see that the suit she had worn at the museum was now all tattered and charred from the lightning.

"Ugh!" Radiance gagged and plugged her nose. "It smells like an overcooked omelet! And whatever happened to your mane, darling? You look as if you've been struck by lightning!"

"As a matter of fact…"

"Zapp," Mistress Mare-velous said, running up to them. "Who's this mare and why is she so nitpicky?"

"Well!" Radiance said with a huff. "I never!"

The earth mare pushed Zapp aside and confronted the unicorn. "What do ya think you're doin'? Ya can't just swoop in like some hero and start swingin' magical hammers at monsters all willy-nilly!"

"Why not? It's a free country." Radiance glanced at Zapp. "Besides, you seem to be accepting plenty of help from civilians today."

"One, I did *not* ask her to come along. Two, ya can't go hurtin' that giant pony!"

Radiance narrowed her eyes. "That *monster* hurt my friend! She's in

the hospital now!"

"She didn't mean to!" Zapp insisted.

"What are you talking about?"

"She's under some spell!"

"And brute force isn't going to help," the Matter-Horn said, landing next to the unicorn. "What we need is a strategic…"

She was cut off as something pink zoomed past all of them. Radiance shrieked as her mane was blown to the side.

" *Now* what?" Mare-velous said.

Suddenly, a pink mare dressed in a pink hoodie, sweatpants and ski mask appeared at the hoof of Fluttershy.

"Hey, ugly!" Pinkamena called up.

Fluttershy turned at the insult. Pinkamena bounced up and down excitedly.

"Betcha can't catch me!"

Roaring, Fluttershy brought her hoof down on the pony, but she zipped out of the way before she could be squashed. Confused, the creature looked around. Pinkamena was now behind her, tapping on her flank.

"Over here!"

Fluttershy tried smashing her again, but Pinkamena was too fast.

"Missed me!"

The heroes watched as Fluttershy swatted all around, failing to catch the pink pony.

"What is this?!" Mare-velous shouted. "Give-Every-Pony-Superpowers-Day?!"

"Oh," Radiance said, scrunching her nose in disgust. "With speed like that, you'd think she would've taken the time to dress more elegantly! Pink sweats? This is a battle, not a gymnasium!"

"Can we ignore the clothes and focus on the fact that Speedy over there's making things worse?" Zapp said.

Sure enough, the more annoyed Fluttershy became with Pinkamena, the larger she grew.

"We gotta stop her!" Mare-velous said.

"Speedy or the monster?" Radiance asked.

"Both!"

"I have an idea," the Matter-Horn said. "Radiance, your bracelets. What exactly can they do?"

"Well," Radiance said, glancing at her jewelry. "To put it simply, I think of something, anything, and it'll appear."

The alicorn stepped toward her. "Do you think you could put up a shield? A bubble? You know, something around the monster to keep her from going anywhere?"

Radiance looked at the size of Fluttershy and gulped. "Well, I've… never tried anything that massive, but…"

Closing her eyes in concentration, she pointed her bracelets at Fluttershy. In a few seconds, a pink bubble formed around the monster. Once Pinkamena saw what was happening, she dashed out of there just in time. Fluttershy roared as she pounded on the dome, making Radiance clutch her head as a migraine began.

"I don't know…" She flinched as Fluttershy banged on the bubble again. "How long I can…keep this up."

"Looks like it'll hold her for now," the Matter-Horn said. "That'll give us time to come up with a plan."

"Oh, goodie!" Pinkamena said, zipping up to them. "What's the plan?

What's the plan?"

Mare-velous put her hooves on her hips. "Now who in the hay are *you* ?"

"Whoops! So sorry. How rude of me." Her voice was rapid and high-pitched, as if someone had pressed fast-forward on it. "Hi! Name's Fili-Second! Get it? It's a play on the words "filly" and "millisecond!" You know cuz I'm a filly and I'm fast! Okay, I just got these powers about an hour ago although I guess it would only be like a few seconds for you but ya see I'm so fast it feels like *forever* since I got my powers. You wouldn't believe it but this toxic waste spilled into my coffee and I didn't see it and it gave me so much energy that I started shaking and shaking and next thing I knew I was in Yakyakistan even though that's all the way on the other side of the continent and miles and miles away from here. So I started running around and around and I realized I'd gotten super speed and since I saw you gals needed help with the monster here I thought why not be a superhero too cuz that would be tons of fun so I picked up these sweats from the mall and *phew!* "

She panted as she lifted the front of the ski mask above her forehead. "Is this thing ever sweaty? I don't know *how* you all can stand to wear these *all the time* !"

Mare-velous face-hoofed herself. "Two minutes into the superhero biz and she couldn't even keep her mask on."

"Oh, darling," Radiance said, shaking her head at Fili-Second's outfit. "Remind me to find you and Miss Burnt Omelet over there some proper ensembles after all this. In fact," she said, tapping her chin as inspiration occurred to her, "I know just the things."

"Ugh!" Mare-velous threw her head back in a groan. "Cut it with the clothes! Listen," she said, advancing on Radiance and Fili-Second, "I've just about had it with you rookies. We've got a situation here, and we don't need ya screwin' things up with your fashion tips and clownin' around!"

"Mare-velous, please," the Matter-Horn said, placing a hoof on her shoulder. "We've already proven that our individual powers are no

match for Fluttershy. If we're going to help her, we need to stop fighting and work together."

" *Help* her?" Radiance asked. "But she's a monster!"

"That *monster* ," Zapp said as sparks crackled through her mane in anger, "is our *friend* ."

"And if we're going to get your friend back to normal," the Matter-Horn said, "we need to figure out what made her like this in the first place." She turned to the others. "Any ideas?"

"No," Mare-velous said, rubbing her chin in thought. "But I think I know who might. Fluttershy's been seein' a shrink for months, said it was for 'anger management' or somethin'. I didn't think much of it, but maybe…maybe whatever those sessions were for had to do with… *this* ."

"Do you know where this, err, shrink is?"

She nodded.

"Good." The alicorn addressed the heroes. "Mare-velous, Zapp, you go to this doctor and see if she knows anything. Radiance, how long do you think you can keep that shield up for?"

Radiance winced as Fluttershy pounded on the dome again. "Not very long."

"What about me? What about me?" Fili-Second asked, jumping up and down.

"Once that dome breaks," Matter-Horn replied, "you can help me and Radiance try to slow Fluttershy down and keep her from causing any further damage."

"Actually," Radiance said, "if you don't mind, there's something I'd like our speedy friend here to do first."

She whispered in the pink pony's ear. Grinning widely, Fili-Second saluted.

"You got it! Be back in a jiff!"

She zoomed off.

"Where'd ya send her?" Zapp asked.

Radiance smirked. "You'll see."

Tree Hugger did not budge from her meditative position when Zapp crashed through her office window. She did, however, open her eyes as the air from Zapp's wing flap caused her herbal candles to blow out.

"Was the door locked?" Tree Hugger asked.

"Don't play innocent with me!" Zapp said, grabbing the front of the therapist's dress. "What'd ya do to Fluttershy?"

Tree Hugger's eyelids drooped lazily. "I'm sensing some negative vibes within your aura. Perhaps you should consider cleansing it with some sonic bliss."

Blinking, Zapp drew back in confusion. "Um…what?"

"Put her down!" Mare-velous said as she swung in. "We don't go roughin' up civilians like that!"

Sighing, Zapp let Tree Hugger go. "Fine, fine."

"Sorry for the intrusion, ma'am," Mare-velous said, walking up to the therapist. "But ya see, we need information on a patient of yours. Fluttershy Buttercream?"

"Ah, yes," Tree Hugger said, smiling. "Sweet young mare. Very in tune with the universe."

Mare-velous cleared her throat. "Yes, well, we need ya to tell us exactly what Fluttershy was seein' ya for."

"I'm afraid I cannot divulge that information." The therapist closed

her eyes and eased back into her cross-legged position. "Trust between a patient and a therapist is as sacred as the pollen carried by a honeybee."

"Huh?" Zapp said, cocking her head.

"She's talking about patient-doctor confidentiality!"

The heroes jumped upon hearing Fili-Second's voice and found that she was directly behind them. She had changed into a white jumpsuit with purple stripes. Another jumpsuit, this one dark blue and white, was draped over her back.

"Sorry I took so long to get here but I didn't know which office you were going to so I just looked around and around the block until I found you here! Anyway Radiance told me where I could find this cool costume and she had one for you too, Zappy!"

She tossed the pegasus the dark blue suit. Zapp held it up to her chest as she examined it.

"Hey," she said, smoothing it out against her body. "This is actually kinda nice."

While she started changing out of her formal attire, Mare-velous turned back to Tree Hugger. "I understand ya've got a fancy certificate and everything, and yerr patients put their trust in ya, but Fluttershy, she's…well, she's become a…"

"A giant bulky monster raging all over town!" Fili-Second said rapidly.

Tree Hugger's eyes opened.

"So ya see," Mare-velous continued, "if ya know anything about this, and how to turn her back to normal, ya've gotta tell us or else this whole city will be destroyed!"

Taking a deep breath, the therapist placed her hooves together. "Her aura is unbalanced. The negative energy within her has overpowered all senses of decency and compassion, manifesting into a physical being of destruction."

By this time, Zapp had changed into her new uniform, and she and Mare-velous were staring confusingly at each other.

"Any idea what she's sayin'?" the latter asked.

"Beats me," Zapp said with a shrug. "Maybe you should use the rope on her."

"I'm *not* usin' Ole Bessie on a civilian." She mumbled under her breath. "Last time I tried that, I nearly got sued."

Fili-Second huffed. "Duh! It's *obvious* she said that Fluttershy turned into a monster because she was *angry* !"

The other two heroes stared at her.

"How'd ya know that?" Zapp asked.

Fili-Second shrugged. "I speak hippie."

"Angry?" Mare-velous said, looking down in thought. "Fluttershy *did* say the therapy was for anger management of some sort."

"But that's ridiculous!" Zapp said. "I've known Fluttershy all my life, and not *once* has she ever…gotten…"

The two of them looked at each other in realization.

"Land's sake," Mare-velous said, putting her hoof to her head. "No wonder she never…I mean when her brother came to visit a few weeks ago…"

"Zephyr Breeze?" Zapp said, rolling her eyes. "Yeah. I can guess what happened."

"He was actin' like he owned the place, sleepin' in Fluttershy's bed without askin' and…her hooves started shakin' and I was so *sure* she'd get upset and…" She lowered her hoof. "…she ran right outta the room."

"She didn't act like that at flight camp. Until…well, she's always been shy, but one day she just became…distant. Like she stopped

coming over to hang out and wouldn't let me come to her house. Eventually, she dropped out of the camp. I thought she was just embarrassed that she couldn't fly yet, but…you don't think it was because…?"

"Dr. Tree Hugger," Mare-velous said, turning to the therapist. "How can we stop this?"

Tree Hugger inhaled deeply as she raised her hooves and then slowly exhaled as she lowered them. "Negative energy cannot be replenished by negative energy. Only through multiplication can that be made positive."

The two heroes turned to Fili-Second, who slicked back the lock of her mane sticking out from under her hood. "Better let me handle this."

She sat down on the cushion across from the therapist, emulating her cross-legged position.

"Oh great and wise Hugger of Trees," Fili-Second said in the best "spiritual-like" voice she could muster, "do you mean to say that negative energy inflicted by external agents will only pollute her aura even further?"

Tree Hugger nodded. "Only through positive energy can her aura be cleansed, and the duality of her spirit, returned to its former balance."

"Hmm," Fili-Second said, leaning forward. "And how did the duality of her spirit come out of balance in the first place?"

The therapist shook her head. "The secrets of sweet Fluttershy's disharmonious state can only be revealed through the trust of those who will accept it for its darkness and light, as she must."

The pink mare turned to the others. "She won't tell us how Fluttershy came to be like this, but if we keep fighting her, that's only gonna get her madder and she's gonna get bigger and stronger. To get her back to normal, we gotta get her to calm down and get less angry."

"That's it?" Zapp asked.

"Uh-huh," Fili-Second said, standing up. "She also told me her recipe for cinnamon buns!"

"That's all we gotta do?" Mare-velous said. "Calm her down?"

Tree Hugger nodded in confirmation.

"How we gonna do that?" Zapp asked.

Mare-velous tapped her chin. "I suppose we use things that make Fluttershy happy."

"The only things I know that really make Fluttershy happy and calm are…"

"Animals and plants!" they said together.

After looking at each other for a moment, the two of them smiled.

"You thinkin' what I am?" Mare-velous asked.

"Yeah!" Zapp then suddenly frowned. "At least I hope so."

"Fili-Second." The pink mare zoomed up in attendance. "Get back to the Matter-Horn and Radiance. Tell them to lead Fluttershy to Maretropolis Park. Zapp and I will take care of the rest."

"Aye-aye, Mistress!" Fili-Second said, saluting before zipping off.

Zapp looked at Mare-velous in disbelief. "You mean…you *want* us to work together?"

The earth mare set her hoof on Zapp's shoulder. "Fluttershy's as much your friend as she is mine. Why should I make ya feel bad for wantin' to help her?" She turned toward the window and readied her lasso. "That doesn't mean we're partners or anything. I still work alone."

Zapp smirked. "Sure thing, Boss."

Meanwhile, the enlarged Fluttershy was still fighting against the

walls of her force field prison, making it more and more difficult for Radiance to hold.

"That thing's getting bigger by the minute!"

"Here," the Matter-Horn said, igniting the horn and forming a layer of ice around the bubble. "That should make it stronger."

"Oh," Radiance said, clutching her head. "All that's doing is giving me a brain freeze." She turned to the alicorn. "Once we figure out how to shrink this monster down to size, what are we going to do with it?"

The Matter-Horn shrugged. "Take her home, I suppose."

The unicorn scowled. "You mean to tell me we're just going to let it get away with all the damage it's done?!"

"Just because she's done bad things doesn't mean she's bad herself. I don't believe she's even aware of what she is doing."

"That shouldn't be any excuse!"

"Look," the Matter-Horn said, laying a hoof on Radiance's shoulder, "I'm sorry your friend was hurt, but even if this creature did hurt her on purpose, taking revenge will not make you any better, and it certainly won't make your friend any better."

Radiance looked at Fluttershy as she roared within her bubble. Before she could respond to the Matter-Horn's advice, Fili-Second skidded in front of her.

"Okay!" she said. "To stop Fluttershy from growing we've gotta calm her down and not get her mad. Mistress Mare-velous and Zapp have a plan and they want us to lead Fluttershy to Maretropolis Park where they will—hey!" She knelt down to examine Radiance's glowing pink bracelets. "I know those diamonds!"

The unicorn looked at her in surprise. "You do?"

"Sure! I dug 'em up myself! You see there was this weird glowing pink asteroid that landed on my family's rock farm. My sisters and I

broke it up and I found these bracelets just sitting there right in the middle all glowy-like! If we'd known they were magic, I'm sure Pa wouldn't have had us sell it to some jeweler!"

"You mean," Radiance said, gazing in shock at her bracelets, "these came from… *space* ?"

She cried out suddenly and fell backwards as her shield broke and with another kick, Fluttershy smashed through the ice barrier.

"Whatever Mare-velous and Zapp have planned," the Matter-Horn said as she helped Radiance up, "it better work."

"Awesome!" Fili-Second said as she jogged rapidly in place. "Time to get all distract-y!" She zipped up to Fluttershy. "Yoo hoo!" she said, waving her hooves in the air while bouncing up and down. "Hey, you! Giant Monster-shy!"

Fluttershy glared down at her.

"Yeah I'm talking to you, ya big lug! Ya up for Round Two?"

Roaring, Fluttershy brought her hooves down on Fili-Second, who whizzed out of the way just in time.

"Whoopsies! Too slow!"

Fluttershy growled as she raised her hooves again.

"Hey!" the Matter-Horn shouted, flying in front of her face. "Why don't you try some pony more your speed?"

"Like a tortoise!" Fili-Second said with a snort.

The alicorn shrugged. "I guess we'll just have to do."

As the Mater-Horn flew down the street, Fluttershy stopped an oncoming fruit truck and picked it up. Pineapples, oranges and bananas started raining down onto the street. Fili-Second quickly caught them one-by-one. The driver inside was screaming, glancing around in confusion. His screams became louder as he and the truck were tossed towards the Matter-Horn. Gasping, Radiance held

out her hoof and a baseball mitt materialized in time to catch the truck.

The Matter-Horn saw all this, impressed. She had never realized how much collateral damage happened with her battles, and that it was more useful to have some pony else handle that while she was keeping the monster busy.

"Great job!" she yelled to the others as she dodged Fluttershy's swatting hooves. "Keep leading her to the park and protect any civilians from harm!"

While lowering the truck to the ground, Radiance stared down at her glowing bracelet in amazement. She had just saved a life, prevented some pony from suffering the same injuries as her friend. And it felt good.

Smiling to herself, she said, "This is for you, Coco."

At Maretropolis Park, Mare-velous was perched in a tree, squinting in the distance. Zapp flew to her side.

"Everything in place?" Mare-velous asked her.

The pegasus nodded. "You sure this'll work?"

"If it doesn't, go to Plan B."

Zapp groaned. "It'll embarrass me for life, but if it'll help Fluttershy…"

She jumped when she heard a loud roar.

"Speak of the devil," Mare-velous said, smiling when she saw their pony of interest stomping towards the park's gate.

The three other heroes surrounded her, the Matter-Horn flapping about, Radiance riding on her makeshift flying carpet and Fili-Second zigzagging at the monster's hooves. Fluttershy was getting even bigger with these nuisances.

"Go," Mare-velous said, crouching down. "I'll meet ya at the greenhouse."

She sprang from her branch and landed on the ground while Zapp took off.

"Remember, Bessie," Mare-velous said, psychically twirling her lasso, "no playin' rough." She shouted upwards. "Oh, Fluttershy! Ya lookin' for somethin'?"

Fluttershy gritted her teeth as she stomped towards Mare-velous.

"Um, Mistress?" the Matter-Horn called. "If you have a plan, now might be a good time to put it into action!"

Mare-velous smirked as she raised her rope up to Fluttershy's eyelevel, making her immediately stop in her tracks. The rope was tied around the middle of a stuffed bunny rabbit.

The Matter-Horn blinked. "Okay, not quite what I had in mind."

"Ya want the bunny, Fluttershy?" Mare-velous asked.

She swung the rabbit back and forth, Fluttershy's eyes following it. She reached for it, only for it to be tugged away.

"Come and get it!" Mare-velous yelled as she ran further into the park, the rope holding the bunny floating after her.

Fluttershy roared as she bounded into the chase.

"I thought we *weren't* supposed to make it angrier!" Radiance called.

"Trust me!" Mare-velous shouted. "That's right, Fluttershy. Follow the cute little bunny."

Fluttershy chased her to the greenhouse, where the Maretropolis Gardening Club, of which she was a member, grew their most prized plants. Zapp was waiting at the open doors, but she soon saw that they weren't high enough for their giant friend.

"She's not gonna fit inside!" Zapp told Mare-velous as she ran past

her and into the greenhouse. "She's gotten too big!"

Mare-velous panted as she tossed the rope and bunny aside. "We'll have to make a bigger opening somehow."

Zapp squealed and flew inside when Fluttershy came up to the entrance. Raising her hooves, she crashed them through the green glass, allowing herself to stomp inside.

"Guess that solves it," Zapp said.

"Get back!" Mare-velous said, ducking behind a peach tree while psychically untying the rope from the bunny.

Zapp flew into a lime tree and watched as Fluttershy slowly approached the bunny on the ground. At this moment, Fili-Second, Radiance and the Matter-Horn had arrived in the greenhouse.

"What's it doing?" Radiance asked.

"Shhh," the Matter-Horn whispered, holding her hoof out in front of her.

Fluttershy poked the rabbit curiously, and for a moment, Zapp was sure the plan would fail. Then with a loud squeak, Fluttershy picked up the bunny and cuddled it to her face. Her eyes were closed as she smiled. To everyone's amazement, she shrank down an inch.

"It's workin'!" Mare-velous said.

"But it's not enough," the Matter-Horn said. "She's shrinking too slowly."

Sighing, Zapp came out of the tree. "Guess we have no choice."

She flew up into Fluttershy's view. Fluttershy growled and held her bunny close as if she worried Zapp would try to take it from her.

"What's she gonna do?" Fili-Second asked. "Zap her with a lightning bolt? Trap her in a tornado? Make it rain all over her so she'll get pneumonia?"

But Zapp did something unexpected. Taking a deep breath, she began to sing in a strained voice:

" *Hush now, quiet now,*

It's time to lay your sleepy head.

Hush now, quiet now,

It's time to go to bed."

The other heroes watched in confusion, but Mare-velous stepped out and started singing with her.

" *Drifting off to sleep,*

The exciting day behind you. "

She held onto her rope so that it could lift her up to Zapp's side.

" *Drifting off to sleep,*

Let the joy of dreamland find you. "

The signaled the others to join in. Fili-Second, knowing the song herself, was the next to sing.

" *Hush now, quiet now,*

It's time to lay your sleepy head. "

The others also sang as the Matter-Horn flew up to join Zapp and Mare-velous while Radiance summoned her magic carpet.

" *Hush now, quiet now,*

It's time to go to bed. "

Fili-Second had rushed up the peach tree so that she was hanging from its branch. All five of the heroes were now beside each other in a line, singing the lullaby. Fluttershy's eyelids were drooping, and as she became calmer and sleepier, she grew smaller and smaller. Finally, after singing five verses, Fluttershy was back to her old self

and was now lying on the ground, sound asleep and clutching the stuffed bunny. The heroes sighed in relief.

" *Never* ," Zapp said, pointing to Mare-velous, "make me sing in public again."

"We did it!" Fili-Second said, almost falling off the branch from her excitement. "Whoa! Should probably get back on the ground."

She was on the ground at Fluttershy's side in a split second.

"How did you know that would work?" Radiance asked as she lowered herself down.

"It's her favorite lullaby," Zapp said, flapping downwards. "Her parents sang that to her when she was a filly."

"And she still sings it to her animals," Mare-velous said, letting go of her rope and dropping to the ground. "If cuddlin' a stuffed bunny while surrounded by plants didn't calm her down, that song was sure to."

"So," Radiance said as she stepped up to Fluttershy, " *that's* the monster that's been causing all this trouble? The one who hurt…?"

She trailed off as the Matter-Horn set her hoof on her shoulder.

"Wow," Fili-Second said, leaning close to Fluttershy. "She's *really* cute. Hard to believe she went on a rampage and started destroying stuff."

"Oh, Fluttershy," Mare-velous said as she patted Fluttershy's head. "Why didn't ya tell me? What made ya like this?"

Zapp turned to the Matter-Horn. "Thank you. Thank you for helping me," she grabbed Mare-velous' foreleg, "for helping *us* save our friend."

"Yeah, um," Mare-velous said, biting her lip. "We, uh…we couldn't've done it without ya." She looked between Radiance and Fili-Second. "Any of y'all."

"Aw," Fili-Second said, waving her hoof modestly. "It was nothing."

" *Nothing* ?" Zapp said. "If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have figured out what that cuckoo therapist was saying!"

"And how you distracted the mons—Fluttershy, with your incredible speed!" Radiance said.

"Don't forget how you held her in that shield!" Fili-Second told her.

"Well, it was the Matter-Horn who made it stronger with her ice."

"But you two kept those civilians safe while I was busy with the monster," the Matter-Horn said to her and Fili-Second. "And Mare-velous, if it hadn't been for your friendship with Fluttershy, we wouldn't have known how to calm her down."

"But Zapp was the one who remembered the song," Mare-velous said.

"But you knew where to find the shrink," Zapp said. "And the way you interrogated those crooks was awesome!"

"Woo hoo!" Fili-Second said, raising her hoof. "Go Power Ponies!"

"Power Ponies?" Radiance said.

"Nuh-uh," Mare-velous said, "we are *not* callin' ourselves…"

A flash of light interrupted her. The heroes turned to see a mob of reporters and police officers coming into the greenhouse.

"The press!" Radiance said as she smoothed out her curls. "Does my mane look alright?"

"Oh no," Mare-velous said, throwing her body over Fluttershy's. "We can't let the press see Fluttershy. If any pony knew it was her destroyin' the city, she'll be labeled a monster for life! Or worse, they might try and lock her up!"

"Take her home," the Matter-Horn said. "We won't mention her identity to any pony." She turned to the other heroes. "Right?"

They all nodded.

"Cross my heart and hope to fly," Fili-Second said, crossing her heart with her hoof, "stick a cupcake in my eye!"

She finished her vow by poking her hoof in her eye.

"Thank y'all," Mare-velous said as she lifted Fluttershy onto her back. "I really do appreciate it."

She used her rope to open the skylight and then grabbed hold to allow it to float her and her friend up before the paparazzi could catch sight of Fluttershy's face. The heroes left behind were swamped with questions.

"Matter-Horn! What happened to the monster?"

"Where did the monster come from?"

"How did you defeat it?"

"Who are your friends?"

"I…" the Matter-Horn started to say.

Fili-Second interrupted her. "I'm Fili-Second! I'm the fastest pony alive thanks to some radioactive coffee! She's Radiance! She's got magical glowy bracelets from outer space that can make anything appear out of thin air as long as it's pink and glowy! That's Zapp with two P's! She can harness the power of Zeus with her lightning bolt!"

Zapp blinked. "I, um, don't think I ever mentioned…"

"What about the monster?" a reporter asked.

"The monster has been neutralized," the Matter-Horn said. "Turns out it was just a citizen under the influence of some, uh…"

"Curse!" Zapp said. "She was cursed! So, uh…none of that was her fault."

"For the consideration of this citizen's privacy, however, we are not

at liberty to divulge her identity."

The reporters asked further questions. One in particular thrust her microphone up to Radiance's mouth.

"Where did you get those fabulous suits?"

"Um," Radiance said, looking down at her ensemble.

She just realized what she had done. She had used almost her entire jumpsuit line to accommodate herself and the new heroes. Not only might this clue ponies at work to her identity, but it could get her in trouble with Suri.

However, it was also a chance for success. For Radiance, and for Rarity.

Smiling, she replied, "These suits worn by myself and my colleagues, Fili-Second and Zapp, were designed by a good friend of mine, Rarity Belle of Polomare Fashions." She faced the camera. "If you want your own ensemble custom-made with her brilliance, you can contact her with this number."

When Fluttershy finally gained consciousness, she found herself on her living room couch, cuddling a stuffed rabbit. Clutching her head, which was aching, she slowly rose. She didn't remember anything since the factory, and that horrible stallion trying to take advantage of her.

"What happened?"

"I'm afraid ya had a bit of a…spell."

Fluttershy squeaked upon hearing the voice and looked to her left to see Mistress Mare-velous standing before her.

"Y-Y-You're…" she stammered. "You're M-Mistress M-Mare-velous! W-What are you doing in my apartment?"

Sighing, the hero approached her. "Fluttershy, there's something

you must know."

"You…you know my name?"

"Yes. And there's a lot I need to explain to ya, but first…well, maybe it's best I show ya."

She used the remote to switch the television on. A news bulletin was playing about the events of the evening. Fluttershy's eyes widened when she saw her monstrous self onscreen.

" *Although the identity of this creature has yet to be confirmed,* " a reporter's voice said, " *rumors suggest that it was indeed a citizen under some sort of spell that made her into a monster who got bigger when made angrier. Fortunately, the Masked Matter-Horn, along with Mistress Mare-velous and a host of new heroes, who refer to themselves as the Power Ponies, were able to stop this…* "

"Ya kiddin' me?" Mare-velous said as she switched the television off. "I told 'em I didn't want that corny name!"

"It happened again."

The hero turned back to her friend. Fluttershy had the stuffed animal pressed against her chest as she rocked back and forth.

"No, no, no, no, no," she murmured. "I was…I was doing so well. I shouldn't've gotten mad…"

"Hey, hey," Mare-velous said, sitting beside her. "It's okay. No charges have been pressed against ya. No pony even knows it was you."

Fluttershy looked at her sincerely. "Was any pony…hurt?"

The hero bit her lip. "Well, uh…"

"Oh my gosh!" She buried her face in her knees. "I'm a murderer!"

"No, no, no! No one was killed! I mean…some ponies were injured, but nothin' fatal! Look, we managed to calm ya down before ya did any real damage and I brought ya back here before any of the press

could see ya." She laid her hoof on her friend's back. "Everything's gonna be alright."

Fluttershy raised her head slowly. "There's…one thing I don't understand. How…how did you know where I lived?"

Mare-velous looked around to make sure no one was watching or listening. Then she turned back to her friend.

"You're not the only one with secrets, Fluttershy."

Taking a deep breath, she pulled off her mask. Fluttershy let out a gasp when she saw the face of her roommate.

"Y-Y-You?!" she exclaimed. " *You're* Mistress Mare-velous?!"

Applejack nodded. "I would've told ya sooner. I hated lyin' to ya, but I thought if ya knew the truth, it would put ya in danger."

"H-How? Why?"

"Tell ya what. I'll tell ya my origin story," she said, gently taking Fluttershy's hooves, "if *you* tell me how ya got this…curse or whatever it is that made ya that…well, crazy."

Hanging her head, Fluttershy responded with a nod.

"Follow me," Applejack said, standing up.

She led Fluttershy to her room and to the closet. What lay on the inside made Fluttershy's eyes widen.

"These," Applejack said, pointing to the newspaper clipping of her parents' murder, "are my parents." She pulled out her rope for Fluttershy to see. "Almost two thousand years ago, the gods of Grace decided to retire. To make sure the ponies were still protected, the twelve gods of Olympus each granted a symbol of their power to a mortal champion. That's where Zeus' Lightning Bolt came from. This lasso belonged to Demeter, and was given to my great-great-great—well, lots of greats—granny. It's been passed down from generation to generation. My pa got it from my grandpappy when he died."

Applejack paused as she stared at the photo of her parents. "Pa went into the crime-fightin' business first. 'The Masked Ranger,' they called 'im. Usin' Demeter's Lasso, he rounded up all the rustlers and varmints who brought terror to Appleloosa. Then he met my ma, Kitty Coltson, fastest sharpshooter in the West." She smirked. "Pa said he always liked them strong gals."

She frowned. "I was twelve when…when *he* came along."

"He?" Fluttershy asked.

"Longhorn," Applejack said, glaring at the bull's wanted poster. "That no-good head of the Cattle Rustler gang. He'd rob all the station wagons and drive ponies off their land so he could claim it for himself. Ma and Pa wouldn't stand it. When he saw that Pa had the Lasso of Demeter…well, he wanted it for himself.

"So he challenged 'em to a duel, at high noon, right in the middle of town. It was supposed to be just a one-on-one tween him and Ma. Twenty paces and shoot. That's all. But Longhorn…he didn't play fair. Didn't even bother to draw his gun. Just…charged at Ma with his horns and…"

She sniffed as she wiped her nose. "Ma didn't see 'im comin'. Pa tried to stop him with the rope. He…he pulled on the crook's horns but…" She clenched her hoof into a fist. "That just brought his horn right into his…"

She buried her face in her hooves, unable to continue. Fluttershy patted her on the back.

"I…" Applejack said, her voice staggering. "I ran out to Pa. Longhorn…he made his way to me and…Ma, she…she pushed me outta the way, and…"

She held the rope to her chest. "Longhorn thought that…by killin' Pa he'd…he'd have control over Ole Bessie, but…but he wasn't worthy. I…I wanted to strangle him for what he did and the rope…it obeyed me. I…I would've finished him off if the sheriff hadn't told me to stop. The minute the rope let go, Longhorn escaped and…I've been lookin' for him ever since."

Fluttershy looked around at all the newspaper clippings. "And that's what made you become Mistress Mare-velous."

Applejack nodded. "I heard tell that he'd been spotted in Maretropolis. That's why I moved here. But…I still have yet to find 'im." She looked to Fluttershy. "So ya see, I have my demons too. Whatever turned you into…"

"A monster?"

"I didn't say…"

"But you were thinking it," Fluttershy said, looking down at her hooves. "I wouldn't blame you."

Applejack gulped. "So…what was it? A curse from some mad wizard? Some freak science experiment gone wrong? Were ya born this way?"

"Honestly…I'm not sure why or how it happened," Fluttershy said, walking out of the closet. "But I know where it happened." She sat on the edge of Applejack's bed. "It happened while I was at flight camp. Rainbow Dash was in this race against some bullies who were mean to me. They…they flew by me so fast that I was knocked off the cloud I was standing on. I couldn't fly very well yet, so…I just kept falling and falling…oh, but I was alright! A swarm of butterflies caught me before I hit the ground. That was how I learned I had a talent for understanding animals."

Applejack sat down beside her. "You've told me this story before. What does this have to do with…?"

Fluttershy hung her head. "I…I didn't tell you the part where it was a while before any pony found me. It…it started raining. Really hard. The animals of the forest helped me find shelter in a cave. It was so old, so dark, it looked like no pony had been in there for years. At the very end of the tunnel I found the most peculiar thing. A statue. It was of an animal I'd never seen before, and it had a red jeweled pendant around its neck.

"The other animals seemed afraid of it, but the strange thing about it

was that even though it was made of stone, it was actually quite warm. The night was cold, so I slept at the statue's feet. It was so strange, because one foot was that of a dragon, and the other was, well, not a foot, but a hoof. All through the night, I stayed there, and, because I felt so scared and alone, I…I found comfort in talking to the statue. I told it about what had happened that day, about the bullies, and then…"

She wrapped her hooves around herself as she started shivering. "The…the pendant around the statue's neck started glowing. I…I know I shouldn't've touched it, but it felt warm and I was curious and…"

She winced. "When I touched it, it…blasted me across the cave and I felt…different. I didn't know why until after I was found by forest rangers and brought home. Since then, every time I've gotten angry, I…I changed and did…horrible things, things I had no memory of."

Tears began rolling down her face. "No pony knew except for my family, and a few doctors. One doctor suggested I be…put away somewhere, but my parents wouldn't allow it. Instead, they pulled me out of flight camp and had me homeschooled. I had to take my college courses online to avoid classrooms. I…I couldn't risk ponies seeing what…what I was. But now…"

She covered her face with her hooves as she sobbed.

"Hey, hey," Applejack said, wrapping her hooves around her. "It's okay."

Fluttershy slowly lowered her hooves to look at her. "Do…do you think I'm a monster now?"

"Of course not. You're the sweetest pony I know, and what happened today wasn't your fault. Whatever happened to that statue, by the way?"

"Oh," Fluttershy said, laying her head on her friend's shoulder. "The rangers reported the statue to some archaeologists. Apparently, it was a statue of Discord."

Applejack pulled away slightly. "Discord? As in the God of Chaos, Discord?"

"Uh-huh."

"Wasn't he the one that was…?"

"Turned to stone? Yes. In fact, some of the archaeologists believed the statue I found was not just a statue, but the God of Chaos himself in his stone state, and that the pendant was his Amulet of Chaos."

"But…this was at yerr flight camp? How the heck did a statue of a Gracian god end up on this side of the globe?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "I don't know. None of the archaeologists were sure, but the statue and its amulet were brought to the Maretropolis Museum. It's still there now." She hugged her knees. "Sometimes I…I go there to…to talk to him, to tell him things I can never tell any pony, to…to ask him why he…he put this curse on me."

Applejack pulled her closer. "Whatever happened, ya shouldn't look at it as a curse. I mean…every pony has a little dark side to 'em. At least now that I know, I can help ya keep this under control. And hey," she said, turning her head to face her, "ya don't have to worry about accidentally hurtin' a superhero."

That made Fluttershy giggle slightly.

"Let's make a promise," Applejack said, "not to keep any more secrets. From now on, we'll be perfectly honest with each other. Agreed?"

"Agreed." She returned her friend's embrace. "I'm so glad to have a friend like you."

The next morning, the Maretropolis Museum was closed due to repairs. The curator Mr. Fetlock was directing the cleaning and construction crews in the Ancient Grace exhibit. Daring Do and

Rainbow Dash were walking through the rubble.

"So," Daring said, "the papers say you and those capes did a pretty good job last night, capturing Ahuizotl and Caballeron *and* battling a monster."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Rainbow said, innocently pushing her glasses up her muzzle.

Her boss laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna tell any pony it was you. The question is," she turned to her, "what are ya gonna do now?"

Rainbow faced her. "What do ya mean?"

Daring sighed. "When you held that bolt in your hoof, Dash, I could tell. You *loved* it. And now you have this new crew to roll with. Last night's events must make our adventures look…dull."

Rainbow opened her mouth to protest, but then slowly realized her boss was right. "It's…it's not that I haven't enjoyed our adventures. It's just…"

"I know," Daring said, placing a hoof on her assistant's shoulder. "You've found the hero's calling."

"It's more than just wanting to be a hero. See…last night, one of my best friends was in danger and…I thought I was gonna lose her forever. It wasn't so much about having the power, it was about doing whatever it took to make my friend safe."

"And that's the mark of a true hero, which shows that you've learned all you can from me." She looked around the room. "You know, if you're looking for a cover, I hear this museum has an opening. Your background in archaeology and having Daring Do as a reference will guarantee you a position."

Daring winked at her.

"You…sure you won't need me?" Rainbow asked.

"It's not that I won't need you," she replied. "It's the fact that *you* no

longer need *me* . Not to say I won't be in contact from time to time. But you," she gave Rainbow's shoulder an affectionate squeeze, "you're your own boss now."

"You…wanted to see me, Miss Polomare?" Rarity asked as she nervously entered the office of her boss.

Suri was at her desk, glaring at the unicorn. "What," she said, holding up a newspaper, "is *this* ?!"

The front page showed the heroes from last night, Radiance included. Rarity bit her lip. Had Suri found out about her masquerade?

"Just what," Suri said, standing up, "were these ponies doing wearing exclusive property of Polomare Fashions?!"

Rarity released a breath of relief but then her panic returned once she realized the real trouble she was in. "Well, um…this, err, masked unicorn came to my apartment having heard of my work and asked for a suit and…"

"You released *my* jumpsuits to the public *without* my permission?!"

She twiddled her hooves. "W-With all due respect, Miss Polomare, *I* was the one who designed…"

"And once you presented them to me," Suri said, stomping towards her, "they became *my* property!"

"I…I just thought that…"

"And where's Coco?! I need my morning coffee!"

Rarity hung her head. "C-Coco is in the hospital. She broke her leg and some ribs but the doctors say she'll recover…"

"I don't wanna hear your excuses!" Suri poked her in the chest. "This is a breach in the contract you signed when you were given this job! Rarity Belle, you're f—"

"Fabulous!" a voice said.

Rarity turned around and Suri gasped when they saw who was standing in the doorway.

"M-Miss Tangler!" Suri said, quickly smoothing out her mane. "H-Here? W-What are you…?"

"I saw the news last night," Dee Tangler said, looking down at Rarity, "and heard that the suits worn by the new heroes were designed by your prodigy here!"

Suri blinked. "P-P-Prodigy?"

"Yes!" Dee crouched down to the unicorn. "Rarity, my dear, those suits you made were absolutely fabulous! I can tell I made a good investment in buying you those diamonds."

"Oh, rest assured," Rarity said, pulling the sleeves of her coat over her bracelets, "they've been put to good use."

"You…" Suri said, looking at Rarity in astonishment. "You *know* Dee Tangler?"

"We met yesterday," Dee explained. "And I would like Miss Rarity to design a suit exclusively for me! In fact, I'd like her to design *all* my outfits from now on!"

"D-D-Dee," Rarity said, placing her hoof over her heart. "It would be an honor!"

"Lunch at my place. One o'clock. We'll talk business then."

When the businessmare left, Rarity sent her boss a coy look.

"Well, would you look at that?" she said, innocently circling her hoof on the floor. "One of the wealthiest businessponies in all of Maretropolis is interested in *my* designs. She might tell all her friends about them. Oh my, that certainly would bring in a lot of potential business for this company." She casually looked at her hooficure. "It's a shame I won't be working here anymore."

"What?" Suri said. "No, no! I mean…" Laughing, she rubbed the back of her neck. "Perhaps I was a…little hasty."

"Then again, after *that* horrid display," Rarity said as she turned towards the door, "I'm not sure I'll want to be working here anyway."

"Wait! I'll give you a raise! A promotion even! Vice-President of Mare's Fashions! You'll get your own office, a vending machine, anything!"

Rarity turned back to her boss. "Coco gets to be *my* assistant. She also gets paid medical leave until her bones heal completely."

"Done!" Suri said, dropping to her knees. "Just please, please, *please* don't quit!"

Rarity smirked. "Wouldn't dream of it, Miss Polomare."

Three months later, Applejack and Fluttershy stood outside a tall yellow building. As they gazed up at it, they noticed two large orange P's were built into the top.

"You sure this is the place?" Fluttershy asked.

Applejack looked down at the folded piece of paper in her hoof. "This is the right address. Funny, a few months ago, this buildin' was set to be torn down."

"Guess they decided to renovate it instead. What does PP stand for?"

"Better not be a toilet company."

They went up to the entrance, but before Applejack could touch the double doors, a panel opened up in the wall, revealing a circular scanner.

A computerized voice said, " *Retinal scan requested* ."

Applejack looked back at the letter. "Didn't say anythin' about this."

Fluttershy leaned forward and allowed the machine to scan her eye. Shrugging, Applejack did the same.

" *Retinal scan confirmed* ," the computerized voice said. " *Hoof scan requested.* "

Another panel opened with a hoof-shaped scanner. Sighing, Applejack placed her hoof on it, followed by Fluttershy.

" *Hoofprints confirmed. Saliva scan requested.* "

"A what-now scan?" Applejack asked.

A third panel opened and a mechanical arm came out holding a glass.

"Ya've gotta be kiddin'," Applejack said, throwing her head back with a groan. "Whatever this is all about, it better be worth it."

Snorting loudly, she spit hard into the glass. The mechanical arm went back in and shortly came out with another glass for Fluttershy. She too spit into the glass, only more daintily with a soft *pfft* .

" *Saliva confirmed. Welcome, Applejack Smith and Fluttershy Buttercream.* "

As the doors slid open, Fluttershy turned to her friend and said, "I'm scared."

Applejack took her hoof. "It'll be alright." She pointed to her hat. "If anything happens, Ole Bessie'll help."

They walked into a lobby which lacked any furniture except for a magenta carpet. A golden elevator stood at the end. Rainbow Dash was leaning against the blue wall.

"Rainbow?" Fluttershy said, yelping when the doors shut suddenly behind them. "What are you doing here?"

Rainbow shrugged. "Beats me."

"I reckon ya got the same invitation?" Applejack asked, holding up

the note.

"You mean the one that said 'come to this address, come alone, an opportunity for adventure awaits ya?'" She withdrew an identical piece of paper from her pocket. "Yeah, I got it. Any idea what this is all about?"

"We're as clueless as you are." Applejack stepped towards her. "So how have ya been? I hear you've been makin' a name for yourself these past few months."

Rainbow looked up at the ceiling. "No idea what you're talking about."

"I already know, Dashie," Fluttershy said.

She darted her eyes at Applejack. "You *told* her?!"

"I told her about me," Applejack said, "but I didn't have to say a word about you."

"I saw you pick up the bolt in the museum," Fluttershy explained. "But I haven't told any pony! Other than AJ, of course."

The doors slid open and in stepped Rarity. As she placed her invitation back into her purse, she looked up and saw that she wasn't alone.

"Oh," she said. "Hello. Which one of you is the host?"

"Heck if we know," Rainbow said, holding up her note.

"Well, I have no idea what's going on, but as long as we're here, we might as well get acquainted." She held out her hoof towards Applejack. "I'm Rarity. Rarity Belle."

"Applejack Smith," she said, shaking her hoof. "Hey, haven't I seen ya somewhere before?"

"Well," Rarity said, flipping her mane, "I am a designer. Maybe you bought some of my gowns." Then she looked over Applejack's trench coat, which was old and worn. "Then again, maybe not. But

now that you mention it," she said, squinting at her face, "you look awfully familiar."

"Of course!" Applejack said, pointing. "Ya come to my apple stand every now and then!"

"Oh, yes! You make the best apple fritters in town!"

The doors opened again and a pink mare with a curly pink mane and spectacles over her blue eyes came through.

"Hi there!" she said excitedly. "I'm Pinkamena Diane Pie! But these days I go by Pinkie Pie." She started going around the room, shaking every pony's hooves wildly. "What's your name? Where are you from? Any idea what that cryptic message was about? Is this a party? I *love* parties!"

"We don't know!" Rainbow shouted, taking a deep breath. "All we know is that we all got weird, vague invitations telling us to come here. Oh, and my name's Rainbow Dash."

"Applejack."

"Rarity."

Fluttershy stumbled over her name. "F-F-Fluttershy."

Rarity turned to her. "Did you say your name was…?"

"So why do you think we were all invited?" Pinkie asked.

"We must have some connection," Applejack said. "I mean I already know Rainbow and Fluttershy, but I've never formerly met Rarity and…I don't reckon I've ever met ya, Pinkie."

"I can't recall having seen any of you before," Rarity said, looking shakily at Fluttershy. "Except…"

The elevator doors opened and Spike, carrying a clipboard, stepped out and said, "Everything will be explained soon."

Fluttershy squealed in excitement. "A BABY DRAGON! Oh, he's so

cute!"

Spike blushed. "Well, um, thank you."

"Hey," Rainbow said. "Aren't you Twilight Sparkle's assistant or something?"

"Twilight Sparkle?" Applejack said.

"The billionaire?!" Rarity said with a gasp.

"Mmm-hmm," the dragon said with a nod. "And I'm Spiiiiiiii…"

He trailed off when he caught sight of Rarity. Pinkie waved a hoof in his face.

"Hellooooo!" she said. "Niiiiice to meeeeeeeet yaaaaa Spiiiiii!"

"Huh?" Spike shook his head. "Oh, no! My name is Spike. And yes, I work for Twilight Sparkle. She's waiting on the top floor. If you'll follow me to the elevator."

"Err, thanks," Pinkie said. "But I'll just take the stairs if you don't mind."

The others stared at her.

"This building has to be like a bajillion stories high," Rainbow said.

"A little exercise never hurt," Pinkie said, jogging in place.

She ran to the stairwell while the others gathered into the elevator. Spike tried to reach for the button marked "25," but he was too small. Applejack pressed it for him.

"Thanks," Spike said.

"Now what would a billionaire want with us?" Applejack asked as the doors closed.

"Maybe she would like me to customize an outfit for her!" Rarity said excitedly. "You know, I am already Dee Tangler's personal designer. Perhaps word got around."

"She does fund the museum," Rainbow said. "Maybe she'd like to make a donation."

"Maybe she'd like to participate in the veterinary clinic's annual fundraiser," Fluttershy said in a quiet voice.

"Still doesn't explain all the secrecy," Applejack said. "If this was strictly business, why did she keep the letters anonymous?"

"And I can't imagine what she'd want with a simple apple vendor," Rarity said. "No offense."

Applejack snorted. "I hope this meetin' or whatever it is doesn't take too long."

When the doors opened, Pinkie was there, leaning against a water cooler and drinking from a paper cup.

"Hey there, slowpokes!" she said smugly. "What took ya so long?"

Rarity blinked. "How did you get up here so…?"

"You guys, this place has *everything* ! A pool, a gym, a bowling alley! Each one of us even gets her own floor!"

"But how…?" Applejack shook her head. "There's no way ya could've seen the whole buildin' in the span of a few minutes."

Spike laughed. "And Twilight said you were the smart one."

"What?" she said, looking down at the dragon as he passed her. "Whaddya mean? I've never met…"

She trailed off as she got a look at the room. It was large with metallic walls and floors. There was a wide window, but it was currently sealed with metal. A blue couch was indented into the floor, forming a semi-circle around a large screen. Below the screen was a series of buttons and levers.

"It's like something out of a sci-fi movie," Rainbow said.

"So glad you could all make it," a voice said.

Twilight Sparkle, dressed in a blue pantsuit, came in from a door across the room.

"It's really you!" Rarity said, squealing. "Twilight Sparkle! Oh, it is such an honor!"

Twilight chuckled. "You can take it easy, Rarity."

She gasped. "You know my name?"

"Please, I know *all* your names. You think I would've been able to send you those notes if I didn't know your names?"

"What's this all about?" Applejack demanded.

"And what's with the giant P's outside this building?" Rainbow asked.

Spike went to his boss' side and whispered, "They haven't figured it out yet."

"Really?" Twilight said, turning to Applejack. "Not even you, Mare-velous?"

Applejack stepped back. "W-What's going…?"

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" Pinkie said, raising her hoof and jumping up and down. "I know, I know! Pick me!"

Twilight smiled. "Yes, Pinkamena?"

"Pinkie. I go by Pinkie now."

"Yes, Pinkie?"

Pinkie took a deep breath and rapidly said, "You want us to form a superhero team so we can stop bad guys from taking over Maretropolis after we stopped Fluttershy here from destroying the city three months ago where we all met and worked together and made the Power Ponies!"

She turned to the others, who had their mouths agape. "I figured it

out while I was touring the building."

Applejack smacked herself in the forehead. "Of course! I already knew Dash here was Zapp, but it didn't occur to me that the rest of y'all would be superheroes too."

"Ugh!" Rainbow said, throwing her head back. "It's so obvious! Pinkie's Fili-Second! How else could she have gotten up the stairs *and* seen the building so fast!"

"I'd already recognized Fluttershy," Rarity said, turning to said pegasus. "You should know that…that Coco is fine. Much better, in fact, now that she's back at work."

Fluttershy blinked. "Huh?"

"She doesn't remember that night," Applejack said, holding her hoof out in front of her. "But I reckon that means you're Radiance."

"And you're Mistress Mare-velous," Rarity said, looking her over. "I must say, your fashion sense is *much* better when you're fighting crime."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "One thing I don't get." She turned to Twilight. "How did *you* know who we were?"

"Oh, Applejack," Twilight said with a smirk. "Do you really think I'd make it that easy?"

Applejack stiffened as the pieces started coming together. " *No* !"

"Yes."

Rainbow's eyes widened. "Y- *You're* the Masked Matter-Horn?!"

Grinning, Twilight lit her horn and mumbled, " *T erra, pennae, cornibus. Terra, pennae, cornibus* ."

After she chanted this several times, large lavender wings appeared on her body, tearing through her pantsuit.

"Can't you take your clothes off *before* doing that spell?" Spike

asked with a groan. "I *just* had that fixed!"

Every pony else watched in wonderment.

"An incantation I found in an ancient spell book," the Masked Matter-Horn explained. "Took me a while to master. Allows me to make these wings come and go as I please."

"I always wondered how you managed to do that," Rainbow said.

"But wait," Rarity said. "How did you figure out our secret identities?"

"I already knew who you three were," Twilight said, pointing to Applejack, Fluttershy and Rainbow. "Finding the rest of you out was easy." She turned to Rarity. "Advertising your own designs on TV while under a different persona? Not the best idea."

Rarity blushed.

"As for Pinkie," Twilight continued, "it helped that she had mentioned working at a family rock farm, and only one rock farm exists within a fifty-mile radius. Not to mention you unmasked yourself in front of us."

"Oopsies," Pinkie said, placing her hoof to her mouth in a giggle.

"Anyway, what Pinkie said is true. Maretropolis is a big city, and I can't protect it on my own. Not to mention I also have a multibillion-bit company to run. Three months ago, we proved that we all work well together. And I understand Fili-Second and Zapp have been doing some freelance work of their own lately."

Pinkie shrugged. "What can I say? Crime-fighting is super-duper fun!"

"I would've done more," Rarity said, "but these past few months have been busy with all the new orders coming in. Still, it would be… interesting to try being Radiance again."

"But…why am I here?" Fluttershy asked. "I'm not a hero. I…I was the monster you all fought."

"That may be," Twilight said, "but if you used your powers for good, found a way to control them, you could be a great asset to our team."

"So the PP stands for 'Power Ponies?'" Applejack said, rolling her eyes. "One, that's *still* a corny name. Two, postin' our name on the side of the building's pretty conspicuous for a superhero hideout."

"Yes, but it's also equipped with state-of-the-art security. I've made it so that only the six of us and Spike can come in and out of this building. And, as I'm sure Pinkie has pointed out to you, it consists of several recreational facilities. Each of you even gets a floor that you can design any way you like. And, if there's trouble inside the building or within the city," Twilight said, pointing to a large red light, "that alarm will let us know."

She smiled to the five mares. "So, what do you girls say? You up for working together to protect this city?"

She held out her hoof and waited for the others to take it. Pinkie was the first to lay hers on top.

"I'm totally in!" she piped.

Rainbow was next. "You can count on me!"

Rarity put her hoof in the middle. "Me too!"

Twilight locked eyes with Applejack, who shrugged.

"Eh," she said, joining her hoof with the others'. "So long as I get to keep the night shift."

Every pony turned to Fluttershy, who looked unsure.

"Fluttershy?" Twilight asked.

"No," Fluttershy said, shaking her head.

Rainbow frowned. "Why not?"

"I…" She bit her lip. "I can't. I can't control myself. I'll…I'll just get in

the way."

"Fluttershy," Applejack said, walking towards her.

Fluttershy held up her hoof. "The…the answer's no, Applejack."

The mares watched sadly as Fluttershy walked to the elevator with her head down. Once the elevator doors closed, they turned back to each other.

"I…I'm sure she'll come around," Applejack said.

"It's okay," Twilight said. "There's still the five of us."

"Ahem!" Spike coughed.

Twilight chuckled as she rubbed the top of his head. "And you too, Spike."

"Power Ponies go?" Pinkie asked, putting her hoof back in the middle.

Laughing, the mares joined their hooves together and, as they raised them back up, shouted, "Power Ponies go!"

Phew! SO relieved this saga is at least done! Won't be a while for the next fanfic update, since I need to write for my Senior Project.

Considering Applejack's, Rarity's and Fluttershy's surnames have never been revealed, I made my own.

When coming up with Pinkie's origin, I wanted it to be as absurd as possible (because it's Pinkie), so what is the most absurd way for Pinkie to gain super speed? Answer: radioactive coffee! Also, knowing Pinkie, she'd just jump right into it, no questions asked.

Further details on the origins of Rarity's bracelets and Twilight's discovery of the spell, among other things, will be

revealed in later installments.

The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 1

" *With power comes the abuse of power. And where there are bosses, there are crazy bosses. It's nothing new."*

-Judd Rose

On the top floor of the Power Ponies' tower, Rarity was showing her new teammates the modifications she had made to their super suits.

"Nice job, Rarity," Zapp said, looking at the shiny new lightning bolt cufflinks on her hooves. "They match my bolt."

"And these cute little balloons are super adorable!" Fili-Second said, referring to her white balloon-shaped cufflinks outlined in purple.

"Mine looks," Mistress Mare-velous said, turning herself around, "exactly the same. Not that I wanted a makeover or anythin', but when ya asked to borrow my suit, I really thought ya were gonna…"

"Oh, but we *did* make some modifications," Twilight Sparkle said, stepping up to Rarity's side. "Press down on one of your cufflinks."

Shrugging, Mare-velous pressed down on the golden apple cufflink on her right hoof. To her surprise, it clicked. Suddenly, her mask whooshed off her face, followed by her mane slip. In a matter of seconds, her costume disappeared entirely. She looked down at her wrists and saw that the cufflinks had become chain anklets.

"What the…?"

"Press it again," Rarity said.

Gulping, Applejack did so and this time, she noticed that fabric was coming out *from* the golden apples and her costume reformed around her.

"Courtesy of Sparkle Labs," Twilight explained. "Makes your suit

changes more efficient, as long as you wear those anklets. You also will have an easier time carrying your suits around, as they are tightly compacted within your cufflinks."

"Incredible," Applejack said in awe.

"Your suit has the same function, Zapp," Rarity said. "It's a collaborative piece."

Zapp pressed down on one of her lightning cufflinks, and sure enough, the suit went away, even smoothed out her mane as her new headdress whooshed over her head.

"Cool!" Rainbow said, taking her glasses out of her pocket. "It sure gets annoying having to change in phone booths." She ran her hoof through her mane. "And it'll save me a lot of time combing and putting gel in this thing."

Fili-Second excitedly pressed all of her balloons, but frowned when they didn't work.

"I hope you understand, Pinkie," Twilight said, "but we didn't see much point in giving your suit the same function, as it already takes you half a second to change anyway."

Fili-Second shrugged. "Fair enough."

"Gotta hand it to ya, Twilight," Mare-velous said. "This was a pretty nifty idea."

"Actually, it was Rarity who came up with it," Twilight said, putting her hoof around the unicorn in question. "I just provided the technology."

"Oh, pish posh," Rarity said with a blush. "It was nothing. Although, I do have one other surprise." She took Applejack's Stetson out from behind her back and stuck her hoof on the inside. "I also made a pocket in your hat where you can carry your rope."

"That's," Mare-velous said as she examined her hat, "actually practical."

"Well, not only do I believe that all ensembles should be fabulous, but they should have some level of practicality."

"Did you make any upgrades to *your* suit?" Rainbow asked.

"Yeah!" Fili-Second said. "Like can your diamond bracelets vacuum-suck your suit in too?"

"Not quite," Rarity said, pointing to a single pink diamond hanging around her neck. "You see, Twilight gave me this necklace so…"

An alarm sounded and every pony turned to the blinking red light on the wall.

"Gasp!" Fili-Second exclaimed. "The General Badness Alarm!"

"Spike!" Twilight shouted, turning toward the dragon watching the monitors on the giant screen. "What is it this time?"

"Looks like some of the animals at the Maretropolis Zoo got loose," Spike said, enlarging one of the displays to show a cheetah and a gorilla leaving the zoo gates.

Twilight stepped toward the console. "Who are our escapees?"

"Give me a sec." Spike pressed a few keys and a list of animals appeared in another window. "We've got a cheetah, a gorilla, two kangaroos, and a puma."

"How did they get out?" Mare-velous asked.

The dragon rolled his eyes. "Some idiot zookeeper forgot to lock their cages."

"I call the kangaroos!" Fili-Second shouted.

"No, you get the cheetah," Twilight said. "You're the fastest and will be able to catch up to it."

"Okie dokie lokie!" Fili-Second said before zipping off.

"Zapp, you get the puma."

"Aw," Rainbow said as she took her glasses off. "But I wanted the gorilla!"

" *I* get the gorilla. Mare-velous, you and Radiance round up the kangaroos. Remember, our mission isn't to harm these animals, but to capture them and bring them safely back to the zoo."

While Twilight muttered her spell to get her wings, Spike swiveled his chair around to face her.

"Err, Twilight?" he said, twiddling his fingers. "Do you think I could… help you on this one?"

The Matter-Horn laughed as she used her magic to put on her costume. "You're already helping *plenty* , Spike." She rubbed the top of his head. "You're keeping a close eye on the monitors."

"No, I meant…" Sighing, he hung his head. "Never mind."

Rarity pressed on her diamond pendant and her suit sprang from it, now accessorized with a golden collar surrounding the pendant. Radiance then used her magic to summon her mask.

"Oh wait!" she said, powering her horn again. "Just one final touch!"

The next spell made her mane and tail whoosh back. When the light diminished, her mane was curled closer to her head and it, along with her tail, was adorned with pink diamonds.

Mare-velous narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

"Excuse me," Radiance said, gently running her hoof through her curls, "but if I wear the same hairdo all the time, ponies are *sure* to figure out my secret identity. Besides," she said, glancing in a full-length mirror, "the diamonds add a little more pizazz."

Ten minutes later, Mistress Mare-velous was bouncing on the back of a kangaroo, Demeter's Lasso serving as the reins around the animal's snout.

"I've…corralled…" she said between bounces, "many…a critter…in my…day…but this…takes…the cake!"

Radiance came up to her on the second kangaroo. She was sitting on a pink saddle, complete with thin pink reins.

"It wouldn't be so difficult if you were riding sidesaddle," she told Mare-velous.

Growling, Mare-velous hooked her back hooves around the kangaroo's neck and tugged on the rope. "Whoa there, Kanga!"

Squeaking, the kangaroo skidded to a halt. Radiance pulled on her reins with her bracelets and her kangaroo stopped as well. They were now parked outside of a supermarket, out of which Fluttershy was coming, carrying a bag of groceries in her foreleg. She gasped when she saw the kangaroos.

"Don't ask," Mare-velous said with a warning tone.

"Oh, they're adorable!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "If I had known you'd be riding kangaroos, I would've joined you when you asked."

A loud roar was heard, making Fluttershy spin around. Down the street, a large black gorilla was pushing cars aside.

"If you're still up for it," Mare-velous said, adjusting herself on the kangaroo, "now's your chance." She gave her rope a thrash. "Giddy-up, Kanga!"

But the rope didn't do what she had anticipated, and the kangaroo rose up in panic. Mare-velous let out a cry as her steed bounded forward at rapid speed.

"She doesn't like it when you pull so hard!" Fluttershy shouted.

"Come on, Roo," Radiance said, gently pulling on her reins. "Let's show her how it's done."

Roo bounced steadily towards the scene. Meanwhile, the Masked Matter-Horn was flapping around the gorilla, trying to hold it back with her ice beams. She put up a wall of ice around the animal, but

he was so strong that it only took one punch to break through.

"Need…" Mare-velous said as she tried to regain control of Kanga, "any…help?"

"Mare-velous, use your rope to restrain this ape!" the Matter-Horn shouted.

The earth mare grasped tightly on her rope, still attached to the kangaroo's snout. "It's…a little…busy…right now!"

The alicorn turned to the unicorn. "Radiance!"

"I'm on it," Radiance said, pointing her bracelets at the gorilla.

A cage formed around the ape. He gripped the bars tightly and wailed. Unfortunately, once the cage was complete, Radiance's saddle and reins disappeared.

"Oh dear," she said.

Roo then suddenly jumped, knocking Radiance right off. This broke her concentration and made the cage vanish, freeing the gorilla.

"Shoot," the Matter-Horn muttered. "Let's switch targets! I'll get the kangaroo, and you get the gorilla."

As the alicorn flew off, Radiance rose from the ground, groaning as she massaged her backside.

"Oh, that brute!" She raised her glowing bracelets towards him. "I'll show him!"

"WAIT!"

Radiance stopped and turned to see Fluttershy running past her. She had placed her groceries down on the sidewalk and was now headed towards the gorilla.

"Flutter…shy…" Mare-velous called, still bouncing uncontrollably on Kanga. "It's…too…dangerous!"

Fluttershy ignored her, however, and continued to slowly approach the ape that was beating his chest and shouting.

"Shhh," she whispered, holding up her hoof. "Calm down. It's okay."

The gorilla paused and looked down at her curiously. Fluttershy carefully laid her hoof on his foot and gently petted it.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Leaning forward, she nuzzled his leg with her snout. Then she looked up at him with her big, teal eyes. The gorilla's shoulders relaxed and he brought down his arm. Squinting, she saw that there was a piece of glass the size of a book impaled in it, though barely visible beneath all the hair.

"Oh, you poor thing," Fluttershy said. "Don't worry, I'm a vet. I know how to make this better."

She reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a first-aid kit. After rummaging through it, she took out a roll of gauze and snipped a swatch off with her teeth.

"It'll be alright," she said, gently wrapping the bandage around the glass. "I'm just going to put light pressure on it. Try not to move. It'll only make it worse."

Mare-velous, Radiance and other bystanders watched in amazement as Fluttershy managed to keep the beast calm until animal control arrived. Fluttershy explained the gorilla's injury to the officers and the treatment she had given him, and they assured her that he would be given proper medical attention back at the zoo.

"Darling, that was incredible!" Radiance told Fluttershy. "You were positively fearless!"

"Oh," Fluttershy said, blushing. "It…it was nothing. I was just doing what any veterinarian would do."

She winced at the sudden flashes that came from reporters' cameras. The paparazzi started asking questions.

"What is your name, Miss?"

"How did you know that gorilla was injured?"

"Who does your mane?"

Fluttershy squeaked as she tried to hide her face behind her mane.

"Clear the way!" Mare-velous shouted, pushing through the crowd. "Back off! Give the girl some space!" She walked up to Fluttershy. "Want me to take ya home, Miss?"

Mare-velous winked at her and Fluttershy replied, "That would be convenient. Oh! My groceries!"

"No problem."

The lasso floated into view. The bag of groceries was tied to the end. Mare-velous wrapped her hoof around Fluttershy and grabbed the rope with her other hoof so that they would levitate above the crowd.

The Matter-Horn returned with the runaway kangaroo. "I see the gorilla's been neutralized."

"Hmm?" Radiance said as she posed for the cameras.

The alicorn shook her head with a laugh. "I bumped into Zapp and Fili-Second. They said they took care of the other animals just in the nick of time."

Radiance stiffened. "Time! Quick, some pony! What time is it?!"

One reporter looked down at her watch and said, "It's 5:27…"

"Good gracious! I'm going to be late!"

She summoned her flying carpet and took off.

Mare-velous swung herself and Fluttershy onto their apartment balcony. They pushed open the door and walked in together. Mare-

velous quickly shut the door before taking off her mask.

"That was a pretty brave thing ya did back there," Applejack said.

"It was nothing," Fluttershy said as she picked up her groceries.

"It was somethin', alright. Though ya certainly walked right up to that angry gorilla like he was nothin'."

"I was just doing my job as a vet."

Applejack watched as her roommate went into the kitchen and started putting the food away. "You were doin' the job of a hero, Fluttershy. Don't ya see? Ya have the heart and the gall for it!"

Without looking at her, Fluttershy opened the fridge and knelt down to put away the vegetables. "Just because I helped save the day today doesn't mean I'll be of any help another day."

"What are ya talkin' about? If we ever have a zoo escape like that again, or even a giant dinosaur or dragon or somethin', ya could be of great help! And in a regular crime like a bank robbery, ya could just get mad and…"

"No, Applejack!" Fluttershy shouted, slamming the refrigerator door. She spun around to face her roommate. "I have told you a thousand times that I am *not* joining the Power Ponies!"

"But Fluttershy…"

"You think I could live with myself if I did anything to hurt any pony again?!" As she stepped closer, she started to grow. "It wouldn't matter if I beat the bad guys!" Her eyes reddened. "I wouldn't be able to control myself!" Applejack backed away as Fluttershy's muscles tore through her lab coat. "I can't…be…a…MONSTER!"

"Alright, calm down!" Applejack said, holding up her hooves. "Breathe like Tree Hugger taught ya!"

But Fluttershy's only response was a roar in the face. Looking back into the living room, Applejack saw that Angel was sleeping on the couch. Grabbing him, Applejack held the rabbit up to Fluttershy.

"Look!" she said. "Look what I got here! It's your little bunny Angel! Oh my, isn't he cute and fluffy?"

Fluttershy's eyes softened and she took Angel in her hooves. She started petting him gently. A minute later, she was shrinking back into her old self.

"Phew!" Applejack said, wiping the sweat off her brow.

"Huh?" Fluttershy said, glancing around. "What happened?" She looked down at her torn coat and gasped. "Oh my! I did it again, didn't I?! Did I hurt any pony?!"

"No, no!" Applejack insisted, holding up her hooves. "You're fine. I'm fine. Angel's fine."

Fluttershy sighed in relief. "Now you see why I can't be a hero like you. When I get angry, when I transform," she said, walking slowly past her roommate, "I'm nothing but a monster."

Rarity was sitting in Dee Tangler's office at her shampoo factory. Dee was dressing behind a screen while four earth stallion assistants waited in attendance.

"Rarity, dear," Dee called from behind the screen, "this suit you've made me is absolutely fabulous!"

"I must say I was rather surprised when you asked for a jumpsuit," Rarity said. "Is this for a special occasion?"

"It's just because. Those suits you designed for the new Power Ponies have really sparked a fad. I just want to keep up with the latest fashions."

Dee stepped out, dressed in a purple jumpsuit with a gold collar and black boots accented with gold. She turned to admire herself in her mirrors, of which she had quite a few. Not only was there a trifold mirror in the corner, but there were mirrors all along the walls. The trifold itself had two smaller mirrors hanging on the side, high enough for Dee to get a close-up of her head.

"Fabulous," she said again, turning herself around. "You've really outdone yourself this time, Rarity. I knew I could count on you."

Rarity blushed. "It was no problem, Dee. I'd do anything for a…"

Dee screamed suddenly, making every pony jump. "Look!" She lifted a lock of her blue mane and held it up to one of the smaller mirrors. "Split end! SPLIT END!"

One of her assistants, who was dressed in a purple top, rushed to her side. He had a dark gray coat, a jagged pink and white mane style and a cutie mark of a hairdryer.

"Don't panic, Miss Tangler!" he said in a nervous voice. "We'll take care of it right a—"

"Silence, Blowdry!" Dee shouted, knocking him back with her hoof. "Haircare Emergency! Now! Shampoo!"

A white stallion with pink-striped hair, pink sunglasses, a red scarf, a blue- and gray-striped vest and a shampoo bottle cutie mark whizzed off and came back with a reclining chair and water basin.

"Just sit down, Miss Tangler!" he said, attempting to sound soothing through his uneasy smile. "Lean back and relax!"

Dee leaned back in the chair while Shampoo quickly put her mane in the water basin and started rinsing it. Rarity watched in bewilderment.

"Sorry for the dramatics, Rarity," Dee said as Shampoo squirted shampoo onto his hoof and rubbed it into her mane. "But this mane is worth millions, and I have to keep it in top condition."

"Oh, I understand," Rarity said. "We must all strive for perfection."

Dee smiled. "I knew you would." Then she shouted, "Comb! Scissors!"

Two other assistants rushed to either side of her and pushed the reclining chair up. One pulled out a comb and started running it through her wet mane. He was gray with yellow eyes and a purple

mane and beard, dressed in a black turtleneck sweater. Yellow sunglasses sat on the top of his head, and on his flank was the cutie mark of a comb running through a lock of hair.

"I'm the head of the largest haircare product company in all of Maretropolis," Dee said as Comb parted her mane. "If my *own* mane is not well taken care of, what will my buyers think?"

"Do you just want the split end or should I trim it all?" Scissors asked, holding up a pair of scissors.

Scissors was a white stallion with light blue hair, the ends of his mane and tale dyed in purple. He also had a goatee, which had a small purple streak through its middle. He had on a brown top with a laced opening in the chest. His cutie mark was a pair of scissors cutting a lock of hair.

"Trim it!" Dee exclaimed. "No doubt there are other split ends hiding down there."

Nodding, Scissors proceeded to snip the ends of her mane.

"You know I used to be a model with this mane?" Dee asked Rarity.

"Yes, I have," Rarity said. "You were called the Pre-Poo Shampoo Girl."

"Yes," Dee said with a sigh. "Then I got too old for the modeling business and the company had to let me go."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-five. But I had earned enough money to start my own company, and left Pre-Poo Shampoo in the dust!" Once Scissors was finished trimming, Dee yelled, "Blowdry!"

Blowdry wheeled up a hood dryer, quickly put curlers into Dee's mane and placed the dome over her head.

"Well, it look like you're busy," Rarity said, standing up. "If that'll be all, I'll just be on my way."

"Hold that thought, Rarity dear," Dee said, holding up her hoof. "I'm going to a charity ball next week and will be needing a new gown. Something simple, but elegant. But no sequins. Those get caught in my mane."

Rarity used her magic to levitate her sketchpad and write on it. "Simple, elegant, no sequins. Got it!"

"And one more thing!" She clapped her hooves together. "Scissors, the ticket!"

Scissors took a golden ticket out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Rarity. She took it and read that it was for the Maretropolis Charity Ball! Her jaw dropped.

"I had an extra ticket and thought you might like to go," Dee explained, sending the unicorn a smile. "As my plus one."

"I…I don't know what to say!" Rarity said, pressing the ticket to her chest. "Thank you, Dee!" She slung her satchel over her shoulder. "I'll have the gown ready for you in two days! No! Tomorrow!" As she ran out of the office, she shouted, "Thank you again!"

Dee grinned as she said, "Shampoo, what does our schedule look like tomorrow? Where can we pencil Rarity in?"

Shampoo took his electronic planner out from inside his scarf and started scrolling through.

"Let's see," he said. "At noon we've got your lunch with Miss Glimmer…"

Dee rolled her eyes. "Can't we skip that?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Tangler. You need to get the rights to that vanishing formula so we can make that stain-remover for pony coats."

"Fine. What about one o'clock?"

"That's your meeting with Twilight Sparkle."

"Of course!" Dee slapped herself in the forehead. "How could I forget? The merger! That reminds me. Comb, how is the hair-growth formula coming along?"

"It's still in the experimental stage," Comb said.

"It must be ready before Sparkle arrives. She wants to be able to use the formula in her experiments at Sparkle Labs. We're talking about a five-million-bit deal! And if we don't get this merger…" She clapped her hooves. "Blowdry! The charts!"

Blowdry bolted off and returned with a graph on an easel. "Given the numerous loans we've had to take out this past year," he said, pointing to the jagged red line, "and the seventeen percent decrease in sales, and Miss Tangler's own haircare expenses…"

"Get to the point!" she barked.

"Yes, well," Blowdry said, clearing his throat, "without the merger from Sparkle Labs, we will be unable to recover our losses this year and…" He pointed to the arrow at the bottom, far below the zero line. "Well…"

"So you see, gentlecolts," Dee said, "we need this deal." The dome lifted from her head and her long blue mane fell over her shoulders. Shampoo held up a hoof mirror for her to admire herself in. "Otherwise everything I've worked for will go down in smoke."

At Power Ponies' headquarters, Twilight was handing out small earpieces to her fellow heroes.

"These listening devices will make it easier for us to communicate," she explained. "Just put it in your ear and press gently down on it to talk."

"Yay!" Pinkie said, pushing her device into her earhole. "I *love* sticking things in my ear!"

"Applejack, did you talk to Fluttershy by any chance?" Rarity asked as she set up her own listening device. "She was absolutely heroic

today!"

"Yeah, I saw on the news," Rainbow said. "She sure she doesn't wanna be a hero?"

Applejack sighed. "She's still hung up about what happened all those months ago. She's afraid of hurtin' any pony else and thinks ponies will see her more as a monster than a hero."

"That's a shame," Rarity said. "I had such a lovely ensemble set aside for her too. You know, in case she changed her mind." She looked at the clock on the wall. "Speaking of ensembles, I need to work on Dee Tangler's gown for the Maretropolis Charity Ball."

Twilight frowned. "You've been working for Dee Tangler a lot lately."

Rarity turned to her. "There's nothing wrong with that, is it?"

"Oh, no. It's just…I've known her for years and…she's not really renowned for being a… *easy* employer."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Spike spun his chair away from the monitors to address her. "Haven't you heard? Last year her workers went on strike because she wasn't paying them a lot. Instead of giving into their demands, she just fired them."

"So?" Rarity said with a shrug. "Business ponies fire their workers all the time. Twilight, don't tell me you've never fired any pony."

"Yes," Twilight said, closing her eyes in attempt to calm herself. "But always with good reason. I always treat my employees with respect. If they have grievances, I listen to them. For instance, I don't have them work Hearth's Warming without even paying them overtime."

Rarity shook her head. "You're exaggerating. Dee is a very generous mare and has been so kind to me. Didn't I mention she's the one who bought me the bracelets?"

"Yeah, and it's amazing she hasn't made the connection tween you and Radiance," Applejack said, rolling her eyes.

"AJ's got a point," Rainbow said. "It's bad enough you told all of Maretropolis that it was you who made our costumes."

"Dee thinks I lost the bracelets," Rarity said. "So naturally she assumes that Radiance found them. Not to worry." She rolled up the sleeves of her coat, revealing her bracelets. "I keep them safely tucked away." She concealed them again. "But it's not just the bracelets. She also gave me her extra ticket to the Charity Ball."

Spike grinned brightly. "You're…you're going to the Charity Ball too?" He crossed his legs awkwardly. "T-That means we'll…we'll see you there so…you and I could…"

Rolling her eyes, Twilight said, "Look, what you do outside of our work is none of my business, Rarity. I just think you should be careful when dealing with Tangler. She is not a mare to be taken lightly."

"Oh, honestly!" Rarity said, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she walked out. "And they say *I'm* the drama queen!"

When the elevator doors closed on her, Spike turned to Twilight and asked, "Don't you have a meeting with Tangler tomorrow about the hair-growth stuff?"

"Yes," Twilight said with a groan.

"You, um…don't *have* to go if you don't…"

"No. Sparkle Labs needs that formula. If Tangler has truly found a formula to grow hair at a rapid rate, imagine how that formula could be modified to grow something else. We could grow plants in a matter of seconds!"

Applejack's eyes widened. "That…that could help end world hunger."

"Exactly! That's the other difference between me and Tangler." She sighed. "Where she sees profit, I see the potential for change."

That evening, at Tangler's Shampoo Factory, Dee Tangler and her assistant Shampoo were on the catwalk, looking down at a large tank of bubbling green liquid.

"Why are the workers wearing radiation suits?" Dee asked, leaning onto the glass railing.

"Well," Shampoo said, gulping as he tapped his planner with his stylus. "It appears that…well, the chemicals we used have created a sort of…reaction that has led to…unpleasant results."

Dee raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

He bit his lip. "While the tests have proved positive in terms of hair-growth…"

"So the formula works?"

"Yes, but…after prolonged exposure to the formula, the test subjects started experiencing some…side effects."

She leaned toward him with a dangerous glare. "What *sort* of side effects?"

"Let's see." He scrolled down his screen. "Nausea…"

Dee huffed. "Nothing a little orange juice can't cure."

"Itchy scalp…"

"All the more reason for them to buy Tangler's Itch Relief."

"Blurred vision, dementia…"

"Wait, what?!"

Dee shrieked as the rail jerked forward suddenly. She backed away and saw that the glass section had moved forward a crack.

"Ugh! How many times have I told you to get some pony to check this catwalk out! This whole building's falling apart! Now," she said, turning to her assistant, "what was that last one you said?"

Shampoo swallowed a lump in his throat. "D-Dementia." He looked back at his screen. "Three out of the ten test subjects were admitted to the mental hospital within three days after testing the formula, and the other seven said they experienced…well, what they termed 'wooziness.' At least two of them couldn't walk properly. Miss Tangler, some of these ingredients…they're too dangerous when mixed together. We aren't ready to release this to the public. Maybe we should postpone the meeting with Twilight Sparkle."

Dee looked down at the bubbling vat of green goo. Her workers seemed hesitant to go anywhere near it.

"But the formula was still able to make the manes of those test subjects grow?" she asked.

"Y-Yes," Shampoo said, glancing at his planner. "In only 2.5 seconds."

Dee was silent for a long while. "We're keeping our meeting with Sparkle."

Shampoo's eyes widened. "But Miss Tangler…"

"We can't afford to postpone this project any longer! And tell the workers not to wear those ridiculous suits tomorrow! Sparkle will get suspicious!"

"But…the workers…they need protection…"

"They can wear their protocol hairnets, gloves and goggles as always. But no suits!"

As she started walking way, Shampoo chased after her. "But Miss Tangler! To release a product this dangerous…one that could cause ponies to go insane…"

"You said so yourself," Dee said, not facing him or stopping. "Dementia's a three in ten chance. It's not like they'll die from it."

"But…"

She spun around angrily. "Do you *want* to be out of a job?!"

He stepped back and stared up at her in horror. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"Then let's keep this between us," she said, smiling as she leaned down to him, "shall we?"

The next day, Dee Tangler was putting on an innocent smile as she led Twilight Sparkle onto the catwalk of the shampoo factory. Spike was trailing behind them with his notepad and pencil in claw. The workers were no longer in their radiation suits, but were keeping a safe distance away from the vat of green glop.

"And this is where the magic happens," Dee said, spreading her forelegs out. "Here's where we make all our products and bottle them before shipping them out to the world!"

"I see," Twilight said, examining the glass railings. "And where is the hair-growth formula?"

"Right there," Dee said, pointing to the green goo below.

Twilight peered over the edge, while Spike pressed his face against the glass. "Uh…is shampoo *supposed* to bubble like that?"

Twilight couldn't help but notice the black cables running directly beneath the railings. "I'm not sure it's a good idea having these electrical cords so close to boiling pots of liquid."

Dee chuckled as she gently pulled Twilight away from the rail. "I can assure you, this place has been inspected thoroughly and has been given a clean bill of health."

Spike jumped back as the glass he was looking through slid forward. "When was that? Fifty years ago?"

Forcing a laugh, Dee playfully rubbed the top of Spike's head. "Adorable little lizard, isn't he?"

"Ahem," Twilight said, clearing her throat. "Dee, if we could be given a demonstration of this formula?"

Dee exchanged a nervous glance with Shampoo, but kept up her grin. "But of course! Comb!" She clapped her hooves. "Go get us a bottle of the hair-growth formula, will you? Oh, and some pony to test it."

Down below, the workers scattered in different directions. This did not escape Twilight's notice. Comb shortly returned with a bottle of the green goop, dragging a struggling worker behind him. It took a hard push from Comb to get him to stay still.

"Comb," Dee said, "if you would do the honors." She turned to Twilight. "Feel free to set a timer."

Comb ripped off the worker's hairnet and opened the bottle.

"Uh…" the worker said, stammering. "T-Thank you, M-Miss Tangler, but I, uh…like my hair the length it is and I…no, NO!"

The formula was poured onto his mane.

"Rub it in," Comb whispered harshly.

Gulping, the worker did as he was told and rubbed the goo into his mane. Suddenly, his mane sprung into a luxurious head of hair, which now flowed down to his shoulders.

"Whoa!" Spike said.

"2.5 seconds," Twilight said, looking at her watch. "That's… incredible."

The worker started scratching his scalp, but quickly stopped when Dee sent him a glare. He put his hoof behind his back and whistled innocently.

"I must say," Twilight said, "I thought you were simply bragging, Dee, but you really came through on this. Sparkle Labs can certainly benefit from this chemical breakthrough."

Dee sighed in relief. "That is so very good to hear, Twilight."

"Now, I'm just going to need the list of ingredients to this formula."

Dee's face fell. "Um…I would prefer it if…I didn't divulge that information to you until *after* we signed the agreement."

"I understand, Dee, but before we get to paperwork, I'd like to know what I'm signing up for. Are there any rare or expensive or… potentially dangerous ingredients I should know about?"

Dee bit her lip. "Well…I don't remember off the top of my head…"

"That's alright." She turned to her dragon. "Spike, the chemical analyzer."

"Right!" Spike said, tucking away his notepad and taking out a small handheld device.

He swiped the bottle from Comb and held it under his device. Dee gasped in panic.

"No, wait, stop!"

The chemical analyzer's screen turned red and Spike dropped the pencil he had been holding. "Uh…Twilight?"

Biting the edge of her hoof, Dee watched as Twilight read the results on the scanner. She did not look pleased.

"Well, uh…Dee," she said, turning to the other businessmare. "It seems that…well, some of the chemical compounds you've put in here…while harmless alone, when combined together its results are…well, radioactive." Her face turned serious. "Did you know about this?"

Dee forced a smile. "I…I can assure you that if I had any idea that my formula was harmful, I wouldn't have let my workers anywhere near it!"

"Then why'd ya have us ditch the radiation suits?" the now long-haired worker asked.

Dee darted her eyes at him. "Why, you…you're fired!"

He screamed. "I'm on fire?!" He looked all around his body and

started padding down on it desperately. "Get it off me! I'm burning! Help me!"

"Restrain him!" Dee shouted.

Comb and Scissors each grabbed a foreleg of the rambling stallion.

"You think he'll end up like the others?" Scissors whispered to Comb.

"Shut up!" Dee hissed through her teeth.

"Others?" Spike said.

"No! He doesn't know what he's talking about!" She grinned so hard it looked like her cheeks would burst. "Look, this is just a minor setback!" Her eye twitched. "You're a scientist, Sparkle! You understand! Accidents happen!"

"Except you knew this 'accident' would happen," Twilight said. "And…you were going to sell this to me. More importantly, you were going to send this out to the public…"

"Just give us time! We can fix it! You…you can help fix it! You've got other scientists who can…"

The unicorn set her hoof down. "It's not just the formula, Dee. You were well aware that this formula wasn't safe. And yet, you've endangered your workers, and you were willing to endanger all of Maretropolis! Not only can I not accept your deal, but…I might have to call the authorities."

Dee froze. "N-No…you can't! They'll…they'll shut me down! I'll be ruined!"

"You should've thought of that sooner." Twilight turned her back on her. "Come on, Spike."

She and her dragon walked towards the exit. Dee chased after them.

"No, please!" she called. "This company is all I have! I can't let it go

down in…"

She yelped as she stepped onto the pencil Spike had dropped. It caused her to stumble to the side of the catwalk. She gripped the rail for balance, but the sudden weight was the straw that broke the camel's back. The railing gave way and the section of glass fell back into the vat of the hair-growth formula.

Twilight and Spike spun around upon hearing Dee's screams. Her assistants rushed to the gap in the rail and looked over in panic. They sighed in relief when they saw that their employer had grabbed hold of the electrical cable.

"Thank Celestia!" Scissors said, reaching out his hoof. "Grab on, Boss!"

Grunting, Dee reached for him, but the minute her hoof left the cable, it snapped. A sudden electrical shock caused her to lose her grip and she screamed as her fall continued. Down, down she went, the green goop bubbling beneath her, the end of the sparking cable falling with her.

Twilight and Spike ran up to the rail.

"Dee!" Twilight shouted, preparing her horn.

But her reaction was too slow. Dee's wails were cut off as she hit the goo with a *plop!*

"Some pony get a rope or stick or something!" Twilight yelled. "Get her out of there!"

Then the live wire made contact with the chemicals. Every pony jumped back as the goop erupted into a geyser, spraying up towards the ceiling. The workers on the ground floor screamed as they raced out of the room. On the catwalk, the assistants and Spike covered their eyes, but Twilight watched as electric sparks enveloped the green geyser before them.

The goop came back down, splashing in all directions as it returned to the pot. Twilight and the others peered over the edge. The goo was now completely still, save the sparks flying up from it.

And Dee Tangler was nowhere to be seen.

"Sweet Celestia almighty," Twilight muttered.

Spike then noticed something near his foot. He picked it up and gazed at it in horror.

"T-Twilight," he said, holding the object up to his face. "M-My…my pencil."

Understanding what had happened, she put her hooves around him. "Oh Spike."

Twilight and Spike now sat on a bench outside the shampoo factory while the radiation squad examined the place. The two of them had already been through the decontamination shower and had been given warm towels. Spike was still staring at the pencil in his claw while Twilight still held him.

Rarity came down the street, levitating a black garment bag beside her. She looked in alarm at the yellow tape surrounding the building and the radiation squad scanning the walls. Rarity ran up to Twilight and Spike.

"Whatever in the world is going on here?" she asked. "Where's Dee?"

"I…" Spike said, his lip quivering. "I killed her."

Rarity blinked. "W-What?"

"You didn't kill her, Spike," Twilight said, pulling him closer. "It was an accident."

"What accident? Twilight, what's happened?"

Twilight looked up at her. "Tangler…she…she fell off the catwalk and…into a boiling pot of her hair-growth formula and…there was a loose cable that fell in and…" She hung her head. "I'm sorry, Rarity."

Rarity put her hoof to her mouth. "Good heavens." She turned to the building. "Oh. Poor Dee." Tears started to fall from her eyes as she looked at the floating garment bag. "Oh, and she was so looking forward to seeing this dress. She would've loved it."

"She stepped on my pencil, Twilight," Spike said, still not taking his eyes off the pencil. "She's dead because of me. I…I'm a murderer."

"No, no," Twilight said, kissing the top of his head. "Don't think like that. It wasn't your fault."

One of the officers in the radiation suits approached the trio. "We've cleaned out the area as best we can, but I'm afraid we can't do anything about that green goop until the electricity dies down."

"Did you find Dee's…?" Twilight asked, unable to finish her sentence.

The officer shook her head. "Like we said, that thing's sparkling like a fireworks' show. We couldn't poke anything in there without getting shocked. You should get along home. You're lucky you only got the mild part of the blast." She looked back at the ponies being loaded into ambulances. "Those poor folks. That businessmare should've taken better care of them."

"What's she talking about?" Rarity asked her friends.

Sighing, Twilight stood up. "I'll tell you on the way home."

That night, the shampoo factory was completely abandoned. All that remained was the pot of green goop, sparks still dancing around it. All was quiet, save for the crackling electricity.

Suddenly, a group of bubbles popped to the surface. Then something jumped out of the goop. It was long and green, slithering like a snake. It lunged forward, snapping like a whip, grasping the edge of the pot. Another snake-like being burst out, this one slightly lighter. It too grabbed the edge of the pot. More snakes emerged and gripped the edge, pulling hard.

A dark blue head rose out of the chemicals, attached to the snake-like cords that were its hair. Dark blue hooves splashed out onto the edge. The living, electrically charged strands of hair continued pulling, bringing the rest of the mare's body to the surface.

Her eyes popped open. Its irises were as green as the goop, and its pupils as red as blood. Her lips curled up, revealing white, luminescent teeth. As the electricity sparked around her head, she started chuckling throatily. Her teeth then opened an inch, producing a dark laugh. Finally, she threw her head back into a maniacal cackle that echoed throughout the shampoo factory.

Yup. Most of you guessed Dee Tangler would turn out to be the Mane-iac. I based her appearance and origin on that brief look we get into the Power Ponies comic in the beginning of the episode, only felt it would be more dramatic if others had been present for the incident. I came up with the alias Dee Tangler myself. The four assistants are four of the henchponies we see in the episode. I gave them names based on their cutie marks and saw them as the Mane-iac's personal haircare squad.

As for the Mane-iac's personality, I always saw her as a combination of the Joker and Doctor Octopus, but that's not really how she starts out as Dee Tangler. I modeled her friendship with Rarity based on that between Kara Danvers and Lena Luthor in the new "Supergirl" TV series (that show is SO good!). So Dee is pretty much a darker, vainer version of Lena.

Still busy with school, and "Daughter of Discord," so don't expect Part 2 for a while.

The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 2

I've decided this will be in three parts. One, because this chapter's long. Two, because I still need to figure out the third act...

" *I think all of us have a hero and a villain in us."*

- Anson Mount

Dee Tangler's former assistants were cleaning out her office.

"What are we gonna do with all these mirrors?" Blowdry asked.

"You remember what Miss Tangler always said," Comb said as he checked his mane in a mirror. "You can never have too many mirrors."

"She certainly was a mare who knew how to care for herself," Shampoo said, sighing as he picked up one of the many desk photographs of Dee.

Scissors, who was carrying a rolled up carpet, shrugged. "Yeah. Until she fell off the catwalk anyway."

He cried out as Blowdry smacked him upside the head.

"What?" Scissors asked. "Too soon?"

"Imagine if the boss were to hear ya say something like that!" Blowdry said.

"Well the boss ain't here, ain't she?"

Suddenly, the door swung open and the four stallions jumped. A dark, withered figure stood in the doorway, panting heavily. They

backed away at the sight of her enormous mane, which sparked with electricity, and her piercing red and green eyes.

"Mirror," she said, her voice low and hoarse.

"I-I'm sorry!" Scissors said, sticking his chest out. "You're trespassing!"

"Yeah!" Blowdry said with a squeak. "T-This building's property of Dee Tangler!"

"I know." The mare stuck her dark blue face into the light, still dripping with green goop. "I own the place."

"W-What?" Comb asked, his lip quivering. "W-Who are…?"

Her eyes flicked in his direction. "None of you…recognize me?"

Shampoo gulped. "S-Should we?"

She then spotted the boxes containing her things. Growling, she glared at the stallions.

"So," she said, taking threatening steps forward. "I'm dead for a few hours…"

The stallions screamed as one of her locks of hair snapped towards them, wrapping itself around Blowdry's middle. Three more locks came for the others.

"And you decide," she said, her hair bringing all four stallions to her face, "to raid my office," her teeth gritted together before she shouted, "AS IF IT'S SUDDENLY ALL YOURS?!"

All their manes were standing on end.

"Wait a minute," Shampoo said. "I know that bellow." He squinted at her. "M-Miss…T-Tangler?"

Blowdry gasped. "Boss?"

"You're alive?" Comb asked. "What's happened to you?"

"You could say," Dee said, chuckling, "that little toxic bath gave me quite the makeover."

"Wow," Shampoo said. "You look…"

"Awful," Scissors said.

"Shush!" Comb whispered in panic.

"WHAT?!" Dee shouted, dropping the stallions and making them shriek. "Mirror! Now!"

Scissors grunted as he rubbed his sore backside. "Which one?"

"Any one! UGH! You useless…"

She mumbled under her breath as she made her way to the trifold mirror. What she saw made her gasp. Leaning forward, she got a closer inspection of her abnormal eyes. She then moved back and touched the dark fur on her face. Then her hooves went up to her mane and spread out, unable to meet the ends.

"My mane," she murmured. "My beautiful mane…"

"I think it's a good color on you, Boss!" Blowdry said, nodding rapidly as he nudged Scissors in the side.

"Err, yeah!" Scissors said, forcing a smile. "Matches your…eyes!"

"And goes well with that indigo complexion," Comb said, rubbing his hooves together nervously.

"And, um," Shampoo said as he stepped over one of the wriggling locks, "quite *lively* too."

"And soft!" Comb knelt down to brush his hoof over one of the locks. "Oh, but a bit knotty too. Don't worry! I can fix those if you'd like!"

"Yes!" Scissors said, examining the length of the hair. "I can also trim it!"

"We can even dye it back to its original color!" Shampoo insisted.

"Or something new if you'd like!"

"Are you kidding?" Dee said.

When she turned around to face them, her pupils had shrunk and her mouth was curved into a crooked, toothy smile. The sight made the assistants flinch.

"It's," Dee said, lifting the locks of her mane in her hooves, " *gorgeous!* " She let out a laugh that sounded like a broken record. "Phenomenal! Bold! And, more importantly," she cackled as her mane rose above her head, " *practical* !"

One lock snapped toward one of the boxes and grabbed a framed newspaper clipping. It showed a picture of Dee Tangler cutting the ribbon in front of the shampoo factory. Twilight Sparkle was standing with the other business ponies nearby.

"I'd almost thank that Sparkle for ruining my life," Dee said, staring at the picture suspended from her hair. "That is," she scowled, "if she hadn't *ruined* my life!" She crushed the frame in her mane, sending splinters everywhere. "She's going to pay."

"You wanna sue her, Miss Tangler?" Shampoo said, pulling out his planner. "I'm sure we'll have our case given the physical and… psychological effects of your accident…"

He yelped as his planner was knocked out of his hoof by Dee's mane.

"This isn't a matter of money, Shampoo," she said, using her lower locks to lift her body off the floor. "She destroyed my company, my reputation, my *mane* ! She should pay with her *life* !"

"Are you suggesting," Blowdry said with a gulp, " *murder* ?!"

"What are you?" Scissors asked, quivering. "Some kind of maniac?"

Dee darted her eyes at him, and he shrank under her gaze. He was certain she was going to hurt him with her hair, but then she surprised him with a dark chuckle.

"Yes," she said, looking into the many mirrors on the wall. "Yes I am."

In Twilight Sparkle's penthouse apartment, Spike slowly opened the door to his guardian's bedroom.

"Pssst," he whispered. "Twilight?"

"Spike?" Groaning, Twilight rose from her large, purple, circular bed and rubbed her eyes. "Why aren't you asleep?"

Sighing, Spike walked into the room. "I *can't* sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I…I see her…falling." He sat on the edge of her bed. "And I hear her scream…her awful scream…and I…I see her trip… on…on my pencil… *my* pencil…"

"Oh, Spike," Twilight said, holding out her hooves. "Come here."

Spike crawled up into her embrace and she tenderly stroked his spines.

"It's been three days," she said. "And it was all an…"

"I know…I know it was an accident," Spike said, sniffing. "But I…I can't help thinking that…it's my fault."

"Shhh," Twilight whispered soothingly. "I know." She hung her head. "I…I feel like it's my fault too. I…I could've helped her, but…I…I was too slow…"

He looked up at her. "It's not like you can save every pony."

"But I'm the Masked Matter-Horn, Spike. If…if I wasn't so worried about revealing myself, I…I would've been quicker…"

"At least you weren't the one that made her fall."

Twilight looked down at his downtrodden face and sighed. "Why don't you sleep in here tonight? We'll keep each other company."

Wiping away a tear, Spike nodded. Twilight lifted the covers for him to crawl under so that they could snuggle together. Although having a bedmate usually prevents one from sleeping, it eased the anxiety of both the mare and dragon, and they were fast asleep within the hour.

Unfortunately, this meant they were unable to notice the shadowy figure at the window. A glowing pair of red and green eyes glared through at the two in the bed. The locks of the figure's mane moved downward and carefully started to lift the window.

The window had only been moved an inch, and an alarm sounded, accompanied by a flashing red light. Spike screamed as he jumped out of bed, while Twilight flopped to the floor.

"What's going on?!" Spike shouted, holding his head as he waddled anxiously in place. "Burglar? Axe murderer?!"

Looking up, Twilight saw the shadow retreat from the window.

"I don't know," she said, lighting her horn, "but I'm gonna find out. Spike, call the police."

Spike watched as she muttered her spell and began to transform. "What do I tell 'em?"

"Tell them there's been an attempted break-in and that Twilight Sparkle went to recuperate in the bathroom," she said once she was in full disguise, "and that the Masked Matter-Horn's chasing the suspect."

Using her magic, she opened the window and flew out. The Masked Matter-Horn rose above the city and searched for the suspect. Then she spotted movement down Canter Street. She whooshed down towards the shadow and gasped when she saw its strange, enormous shape. The creature's silhouette resembled that of an octopus, its tentacles stretching out in all directions, snapping themselves onto buildings and propelling the suspect's body forward.

Shaking off her surprise, the Matter-Horn shouted, "Hey, you!"

The figure's head snapped around and the hero jumped upon seeing its red and green eyes. The suspect sent her a smile, its teeth glinting menacingly in the lamplight. The Matter-Horn charged forward, but just when she was a foot away from the suspect, something grabbed her back hoof.

The hero yelped as she was pulled backward by one of the suspect's tentacles. Despite her shock, she noticed how unlike a tentacle it felt. It wasn't squishy or slimy or covered in suction cups like that of an octopus, but soft like…hair?

The hairy tentacle twirled the Matter-Horn around in the air, getting a dizzy wail out of her before sending her flying across the sky. She was spinning so fast that for a moment, she had no idea where she was going. Then she saw a vertically blurred shadow that looked like the Maretropolis water tower. Seeing that she was going to crash, the Matter-Horn tucked in her hooves and flapped her wings to try and get her bearings. Once she was on a straighter path, she steered to the right, narrowly dodging the water tower, and then lowered herself onto the nearest roof, clumsily tripping over her hooves and landing on her chest.

Groaning, the Matter-Horn lifted her hoof to her ear and pressed down on the earpiece inside. "Matter-Horn to Power Ponies. Do you copy?"

Rarity was rudely awoken by the Matter-Horn's voice crackling in her ear. Screaming, she sat up in bed, her purple eye mask still on.

" *Matter-Horn to Power Ponies!* " the voice in her ear said again. " *Do you copy?* "

She heard a few other voices talking over each other.

" *One at a time!* " the Matter-Horn said.

Rainbow's tired voice came on. " *Do you have any idea what time it is?* "

Groaning, Rarity pressed her hoof inside her ear and said, "Agreed.

Some of us need our beauty sleep."

" *Really? Cuz I'm wide awake!* " Pinkie's voice squeaked. " *So what are we battling tonight? Giant dinosaur? Giant hamster? Ooh! Is a guy wearing a glass dome over his head terrorizing the streets with his freeze ray?* "

" *No* ," the Matter-Horn said, sounding slightly annoyed. " *Some pony broke into my apartment.* "

Rainbow grumbled. " *Can't you handle that one yourself?* "

" *Yeah!* " Applejack's voice broke through, sounding strained, as if she were shouting. Her voice was accompanied by the sounds of punches and growls. " *I'm…a little…busy…here!* "

" *You don't understand,* " the Matter-Horn said. " *It wasn't any ordinary burglar. It looked…well, like some sort of octopus.* "

" *An octopus?* " Pinkie said excitedly. " *You mean with giant tentacles and those squishy suction-ey thingies?* "

" *It had tentacles alright, only…now, it was only around my hoof for a second, but it felt like…hair.* "

" *Hair?* " Rainbow asked.

" *Sounds like a* hairy *situation!* " Pinkie said with a giggle.

Rarity groaned along with the rest.

" *Anyway,* " the Matter-Horn continued, " *the police are on their way, and Twilight Sparkle's going to have to give them a statement. Now, you don't all have to come if you don't want to, but at least one of you should be here to represent the Power Ponies.* "

Rainbow moaned in response. " *I'm going back to bed.* "

" *Be there in two seconds!* " Pinkie said.

Two seconds later, Pinkie said, " *Hi!* "

There was a yelp from the Matter-Horn.

" *Be…* " Applejack said between punches, " *there…soon!* "

Rarity yawned. "Well, as long as I'm up…"

Taking her hoof out of her ear, she used her magic to raise her mask from her eyes. Their lids were heavy from being suddenly awoken. She dragged her back legs over the side and landed her hooves in her slippers. She reached for the drawer of her bedside table.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash and the room shook. This lifted the heaviness from Rarity's eyelids as she turned sharply to her bedroom door. Hastily, she magically opened the drawer and was about to take out her bracelets and necklace when the door exploded into splinters. Rarity shut the drawer and faced her intruder.

The indigo mare was high above her, the long, thick strands of her green mane and tale holding her up. Her red and green eyes were fixated on the unicorn. Her toothy smile made Rarity shiver.

"Rarity, dear," the intruder said in a low tone that sounded as if it was meant to sound friendly. "Did I wake you? So sorry about the door. I'll get you a new one."

Rarity gulped as she tried to put on a brave face. Unfortunately, when she spoke, her words came out in a stammer.

"W-Who…who are you?"

The intruder put her hoof to her chest, her mouth open. "Rarity, darling, I'm positively heartbroken!" She raised her other hoof dramatically to her forehead. "Surely you would recognize one of your dearest," she thrust herself forward, making Rarity jump as she suddenly found the mare in her face, "not to mention *richest* ," she pulled back, "friends?"

Rarity blinked as she looked the intruder over. Then she noticed the jumpsuit she was wearing. It was purple, with a gold collar and black boots.

She'd recognize one of her own outfits anywhere.

"D-D-Dee?" Rarity said, gazing up at her in alarm.

Squealing, Dee Tangler clapped her hooves in delight. "You *do* remember me! I'm so touched!"

Coco's small voice was heard outside the room. "Rarity? What is going…?"

She squealed. One of Dee's mane locks reached back and brought Coco into view.

"Dee, put her down!" Rarity commanded, boldly leaping to her hooves. "She's my friend, don't hurt her!"

"Hurt her?" Dee said as she twirled the whimpering Coco with her mane lock. "Why, Rarity, I wouldn't *dream* of hurting some pony you care about! Besides, it's not her I want."

With a flick of her mane, she tossed Coco across the room. Thankfully, she landed softly on her roommate's bed. Rarity released a sigh of relief. Her fear returned when she saw that Dee was stalking towards her, her mane moving like the legs of a spider.

"I came here for you."

Rarity yelped as one of Dee's locks came from behind, pushing her upwards. She found herself in a sitting position, Dee's mane serving as a chair.

"What's going on?" Rarity demanded. "What's happened to you? I thought you had…"

"Died?" Dee said, releasing a laugh that to the two other mares sounded like that of a lunatic. "I thought so too. Turns out it wasn't death, but a sort of…rebirth!" She held up her forelegs as if she had just finished a marathon. "I mean look at my mane! Have you ever seen anything so fabulous?"

Rarity gulped as she gazed down at the slithering locks beneath her. "It's, err…lovely!"

"Yeah!" Coco said, nodding hastily. "Lovely!"

"Excuse me!" Dee said, moving a lock over and around Coco's mouth. "I'm having a conversation with my oldest and dearest friend here!"

"We've only known each other a few months," Rarity said bluntly.

"Nevertheless," Dee said, wrapping her hoof around Rarity's shoulder, "it feels like we're family. Sisters, even! Why, you even made me this lovely outfit which matches my new look perfectly! It's as if you *knew* I was going to fall into a vat of radioactive shampoo!"

The unicorn grinned awkwardly. "How…uncanny."

"Which makes *you* the *perfect* pony for the job!"

Rarity flinched as a mane lock crept over her other shoulder. "W-What j-job?"

"Here's the deal." Dee moved her body around to face her. "I've got something big planned, and I need to look fabulous! I mean," she ran her hoof through her mane, "I'm already fabulous, but my henchponies have *no* sense of style!"

"Henchponies?"

Dee waved her hoof. "Former employees. Only ones who weren't hospitalized or in the Union."

Rarity gulped. The only situation where one referred to their employees as "henchponies" was if the employer was a…

"Err, Dee?" Rarity said. "This 'something big' you have planned, it's not by any chance something… *illegal* , is it?"

Dee scowled. "Dee? There's no Dee here." She turned toward the mirror on Rarity's dresser. "Dee Tangler is dead. I am…" She used her tail to hoist herself up so that she was above the two mares in a menacing manner. "The Mane-iac!" She bent down. " *Mane* -iac. Get it? It's a play on 'mane' and 'maniac?' 'Mane' as in…"

"We get it!" Rarity said, raising her hoof. "But Dee…" The dark mare glared at her. "I mean…Miss Mane-iac, with all this talk of henchponies and pseudonyms and juvenile puns, it's almost as if… you've taken on the persona of a…criminal mastermind?"

The Mane-iac stared at her, her expression unreadable. Then she threw her head back in a laugh. Rarity forced a smile and laughed along with her. Even Coco giggled beneath her mane gag.

"You really think," the Mane-iac said, still cackling, "that I'm a criminal mastermind?" She thrust her face into Rarity's. "Mastermind's a bit of a stretch, but I appreciate the flattery."

Rarity stopped laughing.

"I'm out to get revenge on those who ruined me," the Mane-iac said. "But as I said, I need to do it in style. Which is why I need you," she poked Rarity in the chest with her hair, "to design new uniforms for my henchponies."

"What?!" Rarity squeaked.

"Do a good job," the Mane-iac said, pressing her cheek against Rarity's, "and I might make you my partner in crime! Vice-president, at the very least."

Rarity pulled her face away. "You need help, Dee."

"Of course I do! That's why I came to you, darling!"

"No," Rarity said sternly. "I don't know what's happened to you, Dee, but I do know that this isn't like you. Look, my friend knows this therapist that might be able to figure out what's wrong with…"

The Mane-iac pulled back, appalled. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Am I wrong?"

The villain chuckled. "Nope. But it seems I'm not the only crazy one here if you believe I'll take no for an answer."

"You think I'm afraid of you?" Rarity illuminated her horn. "Think again!"

"Let me put it this way."

She tugged one of her mane locks into view. Rarity gasped when she saw Coco dangling from it. The earth mare was struggling in the hair cocoon that was wrapped around her.

"Come quietly," the Mane-iac said in a sing-song voice, tightening her grip around Coco, "and I won't squeeze your little friend into oblivion."

She could hear her friend's wheezing as the hair became tighter and tighter.

"No, wait!" Rarity shouted, leaping to her hooves. "I'll come quietly. Just please, don't hurt her!"

The Mane-iac squealed happily as she released her hold on Coco, dropping her onto the bed. "I knew you'd see things my way!"

The green mane then coiled around Rarity's hooves. She stood perfectly still as the hair snaked up to her waist, then to her neck, and then covered her mouth and eyes, leaving an opening for her nostrils so that she could breathe.

"Sorry to have to blind and gag you, Rarity dear," the Mane-iac said. "It's just insurance." She darted her eyes at Coco. "I expect you'll call the police, but if you don't want anything to happen to you or your friend, I suggest you give us a five-minute head start before you put in the call." Coco shrieked as the Mane-iac snapped a lock at her, narrowly missing her muzzle. "Kapeesh?"

With a gulp, Coco nodded in response.

"Splendid!"

Cackling maniacally, the Mane-iac slinked out of the bedroom, carrying Rarity in her coils. Coco rushed to Rarity's bedside table and opened the drawer where the bracelets were kept. Rarity had told her to only use them in an emergency.

"This definitely counts as an emergency," Coco muttered to herself as she slid on the bracelets.

She then raced into the living room and to the opening the Mane-iac had made in the wall. *We had just gotten that fixed too,* Coco thought as she looked outside. The Mane-iac was still laughing as she used her mane to swing from building to building.

"Oh, how does Rarity do this?" Coco said, looking down at the pink bracelets. "Um…" She pointed one hoof in the direction of the Mane-iac. "Get her!"

Nothing happened. *Guess it wants something more specific,* she thought.

"Okay, um," she stammered. "How about a…butterfly net?"

A pink butterfly net appeared, but it was hovering in front of Coco and nowhere near the villain. By this time, the Mane-iac had already disappeared around the corner and Coco could no longer hear her evil laugh. Sighing, Coco gazed down sadly at the bracelets.

"Rarity's *really* gotta teach me how to use these things."

The police were searching Twilight's penthouse for clues. Spike, shaking with fear, was on the bed, hugging a pillow close to his chest. One officer, an orange pegasus stallion with a spikey blue mane and blue eyes, was taking Twilight's statement.

"So the intruder looked like an," he said, lowering his notebook to look at the unicorn, "octopus?"

"Well, I can't be sure," Twilight said. "I mean it had these things like tentacles flying all around its body and when it touched me…"

"It touched you?"

"Uh…just for a moment. It felt like hair."

"Hair?"

She blushed in embarrassment. "Sounds pretty unbelievable, huh?"

"Actually," the officer said, smirking, "even though I've only been on the force for a week, I'd believe anything in this crazy town."

"I thought you were new, Officer…" She looked at his nametag. "Sentry?"

"Flash Sentry," he said, adjusting his cap. "At your service, Miss Sparkle."

She giggled. "Just Twilight, please. I hate formalities."

"Well, Twilight, I just have a few more questions to ask you."

"Ask away."

"Has there ever been a break-in here before?"

"Too many to count." She shrugged. "It's to be expected when you're in the business world."

He nodded as he proceeded to scribble in his notepad. "Any other discerning features of this intruder?"

"Yes. They had green eyes with red pupils."

"Mmm-hmm." He scribbled some more. "Other than you and your dragon, does anyone else live here? Any staff?"

Twilight shook her head. "Spike and I usually do most of the work around here."

"Boyfriend?" He blushed. "I'm, err, asking if any pony else might have a key."

She raised an eyebrow. "Err…no. And before you ask, Spike's not seeing anyone either."

He wrote some more. "Do you like…movies?"

Smirking, she used her magic to levitate the notebook and pen out of his hooves. "Here," she said, scribbling in the notebook. "I'll make

it easier for you."

When he got the book back, there was a phone number. He looked back at Twilight, who gave him a wink.

"Um…" he said, blushing as he put his book in his pocket. "Thank you, Miss Sparkle, err, Twilight. I… *we'll* call you if we find out anything."

Giggling, Twilight replied, "I'll be waiting."

Sending her one last smile, he walked away to talk with his colleagues. Twilight was too busy staring at his back that she didn't notice Fili-Second standing next to her.

"Twilie's got a boyfriend," Fili-Second sang.

Twilight jumped and then scowled at her. "Very funny." She lowered her voice. "Find anything?"

Fili-Second saluted. "I zipped through the whole building and found absatively, posilutely nothing to do with the break-in! Oh! Except for these strands of green hair I found near your window though at first I thought they were Spike's but then I remembered that since he's a dragon he doesn't have hair and what I thought was hair was just green spines so I figured they must've come from your intruder so…"

"Pink—" Twilight heaved a sigh. "Fili-Second. The hair?"

"Oh, right!"

Fili-Second lifted her hoof to show Twilight small strands of green hair. Glancing around to make sure the officers weren't watching, Twilight took out a plastic bag and used her magic to carefully place the hairs inside.

"I'll have the computer at the tower analyze them later," she whispered to her colleague. "No doubt the police will find more of these lying around."

At that moment, Mistress Mare-velous swung in through the open

window, causing many officers to jump back in alarm.

"Now what's this I hear about an octopus thief?" Mare-velous asked as she wound up her rope.

"Mistress Mare-velous," Twilight said, pulling her aside. "So good of you to come." She whispered, "We found some strands of green hair that might have belonged to our intruder."

Mare-velous cocked her head. "Green hair, ya say?"

"I know, right?" Fili-Second said with a snort. "If Radiance were here she'd be *begging* that baddie to get some hair dye!"

"That's really strange…"

"Do you know something, Mare-velous?" Twilight asked.

Mare-velous rubbed her chin. "Remember last night, some pony broke into the glue factory and I went to check it out?"

The unicorn nodded. "The thieves had stolen a whole tub of glue."

"I didn't think much of it at the time, but I spotted some green hair at the scene, stuck to the walls with whatever glue was left."

"Do you still have the hair?"

"Sure do," Mare-velous said, producing an evidence bag from her horseshoe pouch. "Think it might've been the same perp?"

Twilight squinted at the hairs mixed in with the glue. "Looks similar, though I still can't imagine what any pony would want with all that glue, or why they'd try to break into my home."

Fili-Second shrugged. "You *are* the richest mare in all of Maretropolis, *and* you run a multi-billion-bit company specializing in magical technology."

"But if they were after my technology, they'd just break into Sparkle Labs." Twilight began pacing. "And all my especially valuable possessions are either kept at the bank or," she whispered, "in the

tower. Unless the intruder was unaware of all this, the only reason they would break into my home is if they were after…" She stopped and shivered slightly. "Me."

Fili-Second gasped. "You saying they might have wanted to *ponynap* you?!"

Officer Flash Sentry heard this part of their conversation and rushed on over. "If this was an attempt against your life, Miss Sparkle, I would recommend police protection until the intruder is caught."

Twilight raised her hoof. "That won't be necessary. As you can see, my apartment is equipped with state-of-the-art Sparkle Labs security measures. The alarm was triggered before the intruder could even step hoof in here."

"Be that as it may," Officer Sentry said, "that doesn't mean the intruder won't attempt to catch you *outside* your home."

"Then I'll have the Power Ponies to protect me."

Mare-velous stiffened. "You will?"

Grinning, Twilight put her hooves around the two heroes. "Yes!" She whispered in Mare-velous' ear, "I'll never be able to sneak away as the Matter-Horn if the police are watching my every move."

Mare-velous put on an equally bright smile and said, "Of course! We'd be happy to offer our services to Miss Sparkle!"

"Ooh, this'll be fun!" Fili-Second said. "We can all camp in here, have a slumber party, tell each other ghost stories, make s'mores, play Truth or Dare…"

Mare-velous plugged her hoof into Fili-Second's mouth. "We'll keep an eye on her."

Flash Sentry sighed. "Alright, but if you need anything…" He trailed off when his cell phone rang. "Excuse me a sec." He turned his back to them as he answered the call. "Sentry, here. Yes, Chief, I'm still at the Sparkle residence. Yes, like she said, some octopus thing tried to break in and…" He paused. "Wait, really? Where? Okay. I'll be

right over as soon as we're finished here."

Hanging up, he turned to Twilight and the two heroes. "Looks like your octopus thief has been busy tonight. We just got a call about a mare with some sort of green octopus mane. She broke into an apartment on Carouse Boulevard."

Twilight's eyes widened. "Did you say Carousel Boulevard?"

"Mmm-hmm. This time, the perp was successful. Ponynapped a young mare. Victim's roommate had a more detailed description of the perp, though."

Twilight glanced between the two heroes. "Um…would you excuse us for a moment?" She pulled them aside and whispered, "Carousel Boulevard. That's where Rarity lives."

Fili-Second gasped and Mare-velous stiffened. The latter pressed on the device in her ear.

"Radiance," she said. "Come in, Radiance. Radiance, are you there?"

There was nothing but static for a moment, then a groan. The three mares' faces momentarily lit up until the groan turned out to be from Rainbow Dash.

" *I thought I told you guys I was sitting this one out!* "

Mare-velous looked at her colleagues grimly.

"Uh, Officer Flash?" Twilight said, turning to said officer. "W-Who was the mare who was ponynapped?"

Flash raised an eyebrow. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh," she said, giggling, "just curious. I mean if the same pony tried to ponynap me, maybe I know this mare who was ponynapped and maybe there's a connection?"

"And so we can go check it out," Mare-velous said.

"Well," he said, looking at his notes, "I didn't catch the mare's name, but she was taken from Apartment 4B at 811 Carousel Boulevard."

Twilight closed her eyes. Mare-velous and Fili-Second did not need to ask, for they could tell from the unicorn's solemn expression.

That was Rarity's address.

Rainbow didn't want to get out of bed in the middle of the night, but the minute she heard that Rarity had been ponynapped, she clicked on her costume and rushed out to Rarity's apartment. It wasn't hard to find with the large gaping hole in the wall. The police were already there, as was Fili-Second, who was comforting Coco on the couch.

"What happened?" Zapp asked. "Where's Rarity?"

Coco sniffed. "I…I tried to stop her. I really did!"

"Stop who? Who took her?"

"It was…I mean she said she was, but I don't believe it. It was…Dee Tangler."

The two heroes gasped.

"Dee Tangler?!" Fili-Second said. "But isn't she kinda…ya know…?"

"Dead?" Zapp finished for her.

"It *was* her!" Coco insisted. "I think. But…she had changed. I mean her fur was all blue and her eyes…" She shivered. "Oh, her eyes… they were green, with red pupils!"

"Hey!" Fili-Second said. "Same as the octopus pony who tried to break into Twilight's place!"

"Yes! Her mane! It was…alive! And it moved like an octopus!"

"But what would Dee Tangler, if it was her," Zapp said, "want with Rarity?"

Coco shook her head. "She said she wasn't Dee Tangler anymore. She called herself…the Mane-iac."

Zapp huffed. "Definitely a maniac if she thinks she can keep Rarity captive."

Fili-Second giggled. "No, silly! She means *Mane* -iac. *Mane* as in *hair* ?" She snorted. "Come on!"

"Yeah, yeah." Zapp waved her hoof. "Whatever she calls herself, she's got another thing coming." She lowered her voice and said cockily, "She doesn't know about Rarity's secret weapon."

"That's the other thing," Coco said. "When Rarity was taken, she didn't have…" She glanced around at the cops. "Well…"

She opened up her robe and showed the heroes the pink bracelets concealed within. Fili-Second gasped and Zapp's eyes widened.

"Okay," the latter said with a gulp. "That's not good."

The Mane-Raising Joke: Part 3

The site has been glitching, so some of you may not have gotten the notification for Chapter 8, which has been up for weeks.

" *It helps us being the underdog. We have nothing to lose. Nobody expects us to win except ourselves."*

- Daniel Ruffin

Rarity yelped as she was thrown onto a cold stone floor. When she looked up, several stallions were standing over her, chuckling. She recognized four of them as Dee's assistants.

"So nice of you to drop in, Miss Rarity," Blowdry said.

He jumped back when one of the Mane-iac's locks snapped at him. "*I* make the punchlines here!"

Looking around, Rarity found herself in some sort of warehouse. Boxes with Tangler's logo on them were stacked high. She gasped as the Mane-iac's hair grabbed hold of her again. Instead of wrapping her up, however, the mane lock helped her to her hooves.

"See what I have to put up with?" the Mane-iac said, gesturing to her minions. "All stallions with brains the size of peas," she snapped her mane at them, "and no manners! But," her voice suddenly became sweet, "they are loyal to me and so *love* taking risks."

"Plus we get paid overtime now!" a stallion said.

"Exactly! With our new line of work, our income will double!" She spread out her hooves. "Which means Hearth's Warming bonuses for every pony!"

The crowd of stallions cheered.

"But," the villain said, repositioning herself on her hair so that she was at Rarity's eyelevel, "as you well know, employee uniforms let the public know that our business is…professional." She slid a lock under Rarity's chin and forced her to look at the stallions. "We need a look that shows their unity as a mob, but also lets ponies know that they work for me." She directed Rarity's gaze toward her four assistants. "The Stylists…"

"That's what she calls the four of us!" Blowdry exclaimed.

The Mane-iac glared at him, making him cross his legs in embarrassment. "As incompetent as they are, my Stylists don't require such uniforms, as they already have a sense of…well, style." She turned Rarity's head to face her. "Think you're up for the job, Rarity dear?"

"Well, I um…" Rarity said, wriggling out of her hold. "You see I'd *love* to help, but…see, I don't have my equipment with me! I mean I need a sewing machine, some fabric, not to mention needle and thread…"

The Mane-iac stepped aside and pointed to a sewing table, complete with machine and spools of thread. Several colored swatches of fabric were leaning against the wall behind it.

"Oh, would you look at that," Rarity said, chuckling awkwardly.

"If you need anything else," the Mane-iac said, dropping a sketchpad and pencil into Rarity's hooves, "don't hesitate to ask."

Biting her lip, Rarity set the sketchpad down. "Look, Dee…"

The villain pushed herself forward into her face and shouted, "Mane-iac!"

"Whatever!" the unicorn squeaked before clearing her throat. "Dee, I know you've just been through a traumatic experience and…you're probably very confused, but I know the real you is still in there somehow. I'm saying this as a friend, darling, but I think you've really," she twirled her hoof in the air, "what's the phrase? Flipped your wig?"

The Mane-iac stiffened. Scissors was snickering.

" *Wig* ! I get it!"

His mockery ceased when his boss struck his backside with her mane.

"Perhaps," the Mane-iac said, slowly rising above Rarity, "I didn't make myself clear back at your apartment. *You* ," she pointed to Rarity with a mane lock, "help me, and *I* ," another lock pointed to herself, "won't hurt your friend."

"Coco's not here right now!" Rarity said, crossing her hooves defiantly. "You have no leverage against me!"

"Oh, really?" She smirked as one of her locks came out from behind her, carrying a metal box with a big red button. "See this? While we were talking in your apartment, I planted a little something on your friend. I don't want to go into detail, but let's just say it will… *blow* your mind! Or should I say… *Coco's* mind?"

The unicorn stepped back. "You don't mean…?"

"Yes!" Her red and green eyes rolled in opposite directions. "All I have to do," she said, raising a second mane lock above the button, "is push this little red button and," she thrust herself forward, " *BOOM!* It's curtains for Coco!"

Rarity scowled. "You're insane!"

The Mane-iac stared at her blankly. "What's your point? So," she said, wagging the remote teasingly, "still think you're not up for the job? Or am I going to have to split a few hairs to get you to cooperate?"

Rarity glanced at the remote, then at the Mane-iac. She was grinning with excitement, her eyes holding a wild look that Rarity had never seen before in Dee. She could hardly believe that this was the friend who had bought her those bracelets for no reason at all, who had saved her job at Polomare Fashions, who had invited her to the Charity Ball. The most generous pony she had ever known had become a psychopath.

Yet, Rarity still had the feeling that her dear friend was still in there. She just had to bring her out again. Glancing back at the remote and then at the henchponies who were pounding their hooves together, she realized that until Dee returned to her senses, Rarity was going to have to play along. Sighing, she lit up her horn. The Mane-iac had her lock over the button, but stopped when she saw that the unicorn was only picking up the sketchpad.

"I'm going to need some velvet," Rarity said unenthusiastically. "Boysenberry. And some white linen."

The Mane-iac chuckled, using her mane to push Rarity towards the sewing table. "Nice to see that your work ethic has returned." She turned to her minions. "I have some errands to run. Blowdry, keep an eye on our guest."

"With pleasure," Blowdry said, sending Rarity a sultry look.

He quickly readjusted his collar, spat on his hoof and straightened out his mane. The Mane-iac narrowed her eyes at him, unimpressed.

"On second thought," she said turning to the next Stylist, "Comb, *you* keep an eye on her."

"Aw," Blowdry whined, hanging his head.

"If she tries anything," the Mane-iac said, dropping the remote in Comb's hoof, "you know what to do."

Comb saluted. "You've got it, Boss."

"Shampoo, make sure Miss Belle has every pony's measurements. As for the rest of you," she said, rising above the group, "I'd just like to point out that Miss Belle here is our guest, and must be treated with the utmost care and respect. Which means," she thrust herself towards them, bellowing, "KEEP YOUR HOOVES TO YOURSELVES!" She snapped her mane at Blowdry. "ESPECIALLY YOU!"

The stallions all nodded in agreement. "Yes, Boss!"

She smiled and pulled away. "Ciao, my darlings! Mama will be back with dinner!"

"Who has dinner in the middle of the night?" Scissors whispered to Comb, earning him a kick in the side.

"Good luck with your designs, Rarity dear," the Mane-iac called, slinking towards a metal door and opening it with her mane. "I know whatever you come up with will make quite the," her eyes rolled around, " *highlight* of my night!"

With a final cackle, she slammed the door behind her.

"Phew!" Blowdry said, wiping his forehead. "I thought she'd never leave!" He glanced over at Rarity. "Now we can have some fun."

"Blowdry," Comb said, grabbing him from the collar. "The boss said…"

"Come on," Blowdry said, smacking his hoof away. "We're bad guys now. Since when do bad guys have to listen to authority figures?"

"Since they can literally whip your flank," Scissors said, massaging his still sore backside.

"Well," Blowdry said, sauntering over to the sewing table, "the boss can't really punish what she doesn't know about." He squeezed Rarity's shoulders, making her stiffen. "Ain't that right, honey?" He traced his hoof over her curls. "How would you like us to give you a proper *welcome* to our little family?"

Scowling, Rarity huffed through her snout. "As… *tempting* as that offer sounds," she said, moving her hoof downward, "as a hostage, I am inclined to do whatever my captor says."

Suddenly, Blowdry's eyes widened and his face scrunched as if he was in excruciating pain.

"And," Rarity said, tightening her grip on something the other henchponies couldn't see, "I believe my captor, your boss, made it explicitly clear that you keep," she thrust her hoof downward, making Blowdry squeal, "your hooves," then elbowed him in the

stomach, "off!"

She finished with a back blow to the face. Blowdry cried out as he fell to the floor, his legs crossed as he clutched the space between them. The henchponies laughed at his pain while Rarity wiped her hoof on a brown roll of fabric, its color she absolutely abhorred.

"What are you laughing at?!" Blowdry shouted, looking at Comb, who had been stoic the whole time. "Why aren't you pressing that button?!"

"What for?" Comb smirked. "Like she said, she was just following the boss' orders."

"Thank you," Rarity said, darting her eyes at the stallions. "Any pony else want to try their luck?"

They stopped laughing and backed away from her.

"Now if you'll excuse me," she said, sitting at the table and levitating the sketchpad, "I have some uniforms to create. *Your* uniforms, I might add."

Comb turned to face the group of stallions. "You heard the lady. She doesn't need you lugs distracting her. Shampoo, go take them into the production room and get their measurements for their uniforms. Blowdry," he turned to the stallion still in a fetal position on the floor, "go put some ice on that. Scissors, keep a look-out outside."

The stallions dispersed. Scissors went out the front door, Blowdry started crawling toward the stairwell, and Shampoo led the rest through a pair of double doors that must have led to the production room. Only Comb and Rarity remained in the room, the former standing erect a few feet away from the sewing table.

Rarity glanced down at her bare hooves, cursing herself for not having her bracelets. Even if she did have them, however, using them would risk revealing herself as Radiance. She spied the remote in Comb's hoof and then glanced up at her glowing horn.

At least I still have my natural magic left.

Biting down on her lip, Rarity concentrated her magic on the remote. She waited for her blue aura to envelop the device, but after nearly a minute, nothing happened.

"Don't even think about it," Comb said, waving the remote. "The boss figured you might use your unicorn magic. That's why she made this out of magic-proof metal." He snorted. "About the *only* product she buys from Glimmer Industries."

Rarity released her breath, doing the same with her magic. Then she looked her guard over. *If I can't use my bracelets, and I can't use my unicorn magic, then I'm going to have to take a different approach.*

Smirking, Rarity smoothed out her mane and flipped her curls. Rising to her hooves, she sashayed over to Comb.

"I *really* must thank you, Mister…Comb, was it?" she said, daintily setting her hoof on his shoulder. "For telling off that brute who tried to take advantage of me. You're *such* a gentlecolt." Her hoof moved down to his foreleg. "And *strong* ."Snaking her hoof around, she began stroking his beard with her other hoof. "And your beard is so…" she leaned forward to whisper, " *rugged* ."

Rolling his eyes, Comb stepped to the side, forcing her to let go.

"Nice try," he said dully. "But the boss chose me to guard you for a reason. I'm not like Blowdry and the others. Don't get me wrong, you're a cute dame and all, but you're not my type."

As a pony who strived to be beautiful and ladylike every day, Rarity couldn't help but feel a little insulted by this.

Scowling, she shouted, "Not your type?! How can I possibly not be your…?"

She trailed off when she caught his sideways glance. Her expression turned to one of realization.

"Oh," she said. " *Oh* !" Giggling awkwardly, she backed away. "So, so, *so* sorry. I did not realize you were…I mean not that there's anything wrong with…I'll just, um…get back to designing now!"

When she sat back down at the sewing table, Comb, satisfied, looked back at the garage door. Rarity dropped her smile and groaned in annoyance.

"Your boss really has thought of *everything* , hasn't she?"

Suddenly, Zapp's voice crackled in her ear. " *Guys, guys! You're not gonna believe this! But the hair octopus kidnapper is Dee Tangler!* "

Rarity stiffened, and as she listened to the conversation between her colleagues, a smile crept up her face.

Yes, you've thought of everything, Dee , she thought, giggling to herself. *Everything except my super colleagues.*

She had forgotten about her earpiece. She could call her friends for help! Eyeing her guard, however, Rarity knew she couldn't just call for help with him listening. He would press the red button for sure. If she was ever going to get out of here, she had to be careful, calculative, and cunning.

Dee has no idea what she's up against.

The rest of the Power Ponies were assembled at their headquarters. They had brought Coco for her protection. She was sitting on the rounded couch, cradling Rarity's bracelets and the necklace containing her magically compressed costume. Spike sat next to her, hugging his knees and rocking himself back and forth.

So many thoughts were running through the young dragon's head. On one hand, he was relieved that he wasn't a murderer. On the other, Dee Tangler was alive, now with a super-powered mane and was out for revenge. What if she decided to come after him? She had tried to break into his and Twilight's apartment! On top of that, Rarity was her hostage. Over the past several weeks, he had grown fond of the unicorn. Not only was she beautiful, but she was so nice and dainty and was always calling him adorable. And now she was in trouble.

It was amazing that he hadn't fainted yet.

The Matter-Horn was pacing around the room. "Okay," she said, her breath staggering. "So Dee Tangler is somehow alive, somehow has these mane powers, and has kidnapped Rarity because she wants," she turned to Coco, "evil henchpony uniforms?"

"That's what she said," Coco said.

"And she doesn't have her bracelets," Mare-velous said.

"Why didn't she just wear those to sleep?" Zapp said. "What if some pony tried to attack her in her sleep? Oh, right. That's exactly what happened!" She touched her pendant. "That's why I never take my bolt off."

"Your bolt is different," Coco said. "Rarity's bracelets project whatever she is thinking."

"Yeah, I know that. So?"

"So, even when she's asleep, they're *still* projecting her thoughts and…" She bit her lip. "Let's just say that last time she wore these to sleep, there were giant, pink, pony-eating sewing machines floating all around the apartment."

Zapp shivered. "Okay, that seems like a reason to take them off at night."

"But if she doesn't have her bracelets," Spike said, his voice panicking, "she won't be able to fight the bad guys! And if she can't fight the bad guys, she won't be able to escape! And if she won't be able to escape…"

"Calm down, Spike," the Matter-Horn said, moving over to give him a hug. "Rarity may not be able to use her powers, but that doesn't mean she can't handle herself."

"I don't know, Twi," Mare-velous said, leaning against the couch. "Rarity may be creative with her attacks, but let's face it, she's not the most… *tactful* member of our team."

Fili-Second huffed. "That's not very nice."

"AJ has a point," Zapp said to her. "When we were fighting that giant robot last week, the robot kicked you into the air. We shouted to Radiance to make a net, but the best she could do was a regular-sized butterfly net."

Coco blushed at the memory of her failed attempt with the bracelets.

"Oh, right," Fili-Second said, cringing. "But she was still there to break my fall!"

"I don't think any of you are giving Rarity enough credit," the Matter-Horn said. "She may make mistakes in battle, but it's not like she's some damsel in distress."

"Have ya ever seen her in action *without* her bracelets?" Mare-velous said, raising an eyebrow. "I mean even without my rope, I can still buck off my attackers. I don't think Rarity really stands a chance against…"

Every pony froze when Rarity's voice came from the computer and the heroes' earpieces. " *My, this is an awfully big warehouse!* "

Spike jumped off the couch. "Rarity?"

The Matter-Horn touched her ear. "She must still have her communication device."

The dragon rushed to the monitor and pressed a button on the keyboard. "Rarity! It's Spike! Are you okay?!"

Instead of answering his question, Rarity proceeded to talk in a voice that sounded exaggeratingly flattering. " *I mean look at all these boxes of Tangler haircare products! Is there still some manespray in there? I could really use some!* "

"What's she goin' on about?" Mare-velous asked. "Why's she talkin' about manespray?"

Zapp groaned as she clutched her ear. "Is there a way to turn these off for a bit so we don't get feedback from the monitor?"

"Shush!" the Matter-Horn whispered. "I think she's being watched,

so she has to make it sound like she's not talking directly to us."

" *But this* warehouse *is so old and dusty!* " Rarity's voice whined. " *Do I really have to stay in here all night? Couldn't you have kidnapped me to a luxury hotel?* "

"Warehouse…manespray…old…" the Matter-Horn murmured. "I think she's being held in one of Dee Tangler's old warehouses."

"Huh," Mare-velous said. "Clever."

" *Though really* ," Rarity continued. " *Your boss could've just* asked *me to make these henchpony uniforms* without *threatening the life of my roommate. Was it* really *necessary for her to plant an explosive device on Coco?* "

"Did she just say EXPLOSIVE DEVICE?!" Coco squealed, hugging Rarity's accessories closer.

" *I suppose it seems I have no choice then but to comply with Dee's, excuse me, the* Mane-iac's *demands and make your insufferable uniforms! I mean the remote you used to set up the device is magic proof, so I can't just steal it, and you're not into mares so I can't simply charm my way out. Guess it's up to the Power Ponies.* "

Another voice, one of a stallion's, was heard on the channel. " *Yeah, yeah. It's not like they even know where you are.* "

The Power Ponies all smiled to themselves.

"Have to admit," Mare-velous said, "I underestimated her."

"She's brilliant," Spike said, sighing in awe.

"Excuse me!" Coco said, waving her hoof. "But she just said there's a BOMB on me!"

"Right," the Matter-Horn said. "Fili-Second, there's a metal detector in the lab on the fifth floor. Think you can get it?"

"Be back in a sec!" Fili-Second said. "Or two!"

She zipped off.

"Okay," the Matter-Horn said, pacing in thought. "So from what Rarity told us, she's in a warehouse containing Tangler's haircare products. I'll admit it's not very smart of Tangler to be using one of her own properties as a hideout. But which warehouse? She's got at least five throughout the city. Maybe if we split into teams, we can search each one and…"

"Or," Spike said, typing on the keyboard, "we can just trace the signal from Rarity's communicator."

"Oh." The alicorn blushed. "Right."

Fili-Second returned with a small rectangular device. "Found the metal detector!"

"And I found Rarity's location," Spike said proudly.

Every pony looked at the monitor, which showed a map of Maretropolis. Spike pointed up to the blinking red dot.

"Aha!" the Matter-Horn said. "She's on Dreadlock Way!"

"Figures," Zapp said with a snort.

"We better get down there and fast."

"Yeah!" Spike said, jumping off the revolving chair. "Let's go save Rarity!"

"No, Spike. You stay here with Coco. See if you can locate the explosive device on her and disable it. It must be very small, and it helps that you have fingers."

He dropped his arms and sighed. "Well, if it'll help Rarity…"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Coco said, nodding her head quickly. "Help Rarity, and Coco, *very* much!"

"Okay, but we need a plan," Mare-velous said. "From what Coco says, this pony has a *lot* of hair. Hair that's *alive* ."

"And what do we do with hair we don't want?" the Matter-Horn asked.

"Uh…" Zapp said, tapping her chin. "Cut it all off?"

"Exactly!"

"Yippee!" Fili-Second said, bouncing up and down. "I'll get the scissors!"

She was about to zip off when the General Badness Alarm sounded.

"Let me guess," Mare-velous said as she joined Spike at the monitor. "The Mane-iac again?"

"Looks like it," Spike said as he pulled up a black and white picture of a mare with an octopus mane. "This is from the traffic cam across from the place that was robbed."

"What'd she rob this time?" Zapp said, hovering over him. "A bank? The museum?"

Spike cringed. "You're not gonna believe this."

"Who wants Chineighse?" the Mane-iac shouted in a singsong voice upon returning to the warehouse.

By this moment, many of the henchponies had come back into a room. Some were pushing each other around for fun. Others were playing poker in the corner. Upon seeing their boss, they all cheered and raised their hooves.

"Let's see," the Mane-iac said as she began handing out take-out boxes with her mane. "Lo mein, chow mein, fried rice…oh!" She slithered on over to the sewing table. "Don't think I forgot about you, Rarity dear." Sitting next to Rarity, she dropped a box in front of her. "Low-fat spring rolls and sesame seed noodles! Oh," she said, showing her a roll of white linen and roll of boysenberry velvet, "and I stopped by the fabric store on the way."

Rarity stared at the take-out box, remembering last time she and Dee had ordered take-out. When discussing Dee's jumpsuit, it had gotten late, so Dee had suggested they order Chineighse. They had talked for hours after that, laughing and gossiping. It hadn't felt like a business meeting at all.

It truly astonished Rarity that Dee had remembered what she liked. Looking at the Mane-iac, she saw a glimmer of glee in her crazed eyes and her twisted smile. If she didn't know any better, Rarity would think that Dee still cared for her.

"Is this a new thing?" Rarity asked.

The Mane-iac blinked in confusion. "What?"

The unicorn pointed to the villain's mane. "Is this a result of your toxic makeover, or were you always this bipolar?"

"Whatever do you mean, Rarity dear?"

She scowled. "One minute you're threatening to extinguish my roommate, the next," she said, pointing to the take-out box, "you're bringing me Chineighse and acting as if we're best friends!"

"Oh but we *are* friends, Rarity," the Mane-iac said, wrapping a mane lock around her shoulder. "That's why I brought your favorite!"

Rarity ducked out of her hold. "And what about your workers? Did you always treat them like this? Yell at them and then pretend to be friendly?"

"Why, Rarity!" The Mane-iac brought her hoof to her chest. "Whatever do you take me for? I treat my workers like family! I mean I could've just sent any old fool out to bring home the barley, but being the ever-caring employer that I am, I went out and got it myself! After all, my workers can't do evil on an empty stomach!" She patted Rarity on the head with her mane. "I know you have your needs."

Rarity shook off the villain's mane. "I didn't want to believe it, you know? When every pony said that you knew the mane growth formula was toxic, that you did nothing about it and even put your

own workers in danger, I refused believe them! But now I see, all this chumminess…it's all a façade! You were insane *before* you took a chemical bath, weren't you?!"

Scowling, the Mane-iac slammed her hoof on the sewing table, making the sewing machine and Rarity jump.

"I have half a mind to press that little red button," the villain said, towering above the unicorn, "and blow your friend to smithereens!"

Rarity stiffened as the Mane-iac continued to glare at her. After a moment of silence, the villain took a deep breath and lowered herself to the floor.

"Nevertheless," she said, "your confusion is understandable." She grinned as her mane began patting Rarity's head again. "It took a while for me to adjust to my new state, and it'll take a while for you too." She lifted the unicorn's chin. "But I'm a patient mare. Once you've realized how much more fun our new line of work is, you won't hesitate to call me partner!"

"P-P-Partner?" Rarity stammered. "Now look here! I'm just here to design the…"

"That's what promotions are for, darling! Now," the Mane-iac said, looking down at Rarity's sketchpad, "what evil ensembles have you come up with?"

Seeing that she was not getting through to her, Rarity heaved a sigh and levitated her sketchpad into view. "Alright," she said in a flat tone. "So since you're going with a hair theme with your villainous schemes, I thought of this barbershop look. Of course, boysenberry and white don't exactly match the fur tones of every stallion here…"

"What tone would work?" the Mane-iac interjected.

"Um…pale, I suppose?"

"Then we'll powder their fur! Ooh!" The villain ran her hooves through her mane. "And their manes should be dyed green like mine!"

Rarity cringed. "Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"I like it!" She tapped a mane lock on the henchpony drawing. "Make a dozen of these!"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Not like I have any other choice but to…"

Every pony jumped as something burst through the garage door. Rarity coughed as she waved a cloud of dust out of her eyes. When the dust cleared, the four Power Ponies were standing in front of the large gaping hole.

"Dee Tangler," the Matter-Horn said, flapping her wings. "You have a few things that don't belong to you."

"Power Ponies," the Mane-iac said, chuckling as she moved in front of the sewing table. "I was so hoping I would run into you."

"And we were so hoping to give you a hoofful of pain!" Zapp said, pounding her hooves together.

"Is that so?"

The Mane-iac then rose above the heroes, her mane holding her up. The Power Ponies gaped up at her in amazement.

"Maybe you haven't noticed," she said, "but I recently got some… mane extensions!"

"Yeah," Mare-velous said, nodding. "We noticed."

"But we're here for your six o'clock hair appointment," Fili-Second said.

The Mane-iac raised an eyebrow. "What hair appointment?"

"Don't you remember, Dee?" the Matter-Horn said. "You called us earlier for a," smiling, she levitated a pair of scissors into view, "trim."

The other three brought out their pairs of scissors. Without the

Mane-iac noticing, Rarity also produced a pair of scissors from her sewing materials.

"Power Ponies," Mare-velous said, attaching her scissors to the end of her rope, "let's split some hairs!"

The heroes charged for the villain.

"Minions!" the Mane-iac cried, pointing. "Attack!"

The henchponies dropped everything they were doing and went after the heroes. The Matter-Horn froze a trio of stallions with her horn. Blowdry leapt onto Mare-velous' back.

"Now what's a nice mare like you doing in a place like this?" he asked cockily.

"I was about," she said, rising to her hind legs, "to ask you," she did a flip, forcing him to let go, "the same thing."

She knocked him out with a back kick to the face.

Fili-Second weaved through her attackers with ease, causing many of them to collide into each other. "Over here!" she cried. "Nope! Missed me!"

Zapp raised her bolt and summoned a small tornado to round up the henchponies. "Looks like you boys could use a… *blow-dry* !"

"Some pony call me?" Blowdry asked in a daze.

Mare-velous kicked him back into unconsciousness. She was then suddenly caught off-guard as one of the Mane-iacs locks grabbed her by the hoof. Mare-velous was brought to the villain's face.

"The only one allowed to rough up my workers," the Mane-iac said, snapping her mane in all directions, "is *me* !"

One lock snagged Zapp by the wing, throwing off her concentration enough for her developing tornado to diminish into still air. Another lock wrapped around the Matter-Horn's horn.

"Hey!" Fili-Second cried. "Put my friends down!"

She whipped out her scissors and zipped all around the Mane-iac. Snips and whizzes were heard all around the room. When Fili-Second came to a stop, however, the Mane-iac's mane was still intact. The scissors, meanwhile, were shattered in Fili-Second's hoof.

"What the…?" she uttered.

The Mane-iac threw her head back in a fit of laughter. "Turns out my mane is un-cuttable! Convenient, eh? Saves me a lot of money on hair appointments!"

Rarity sheepishly put down her scissors.

The Matter-Horn scowled as her horn grew red. "We don't need puny scissors to defeat you!"

The Mane-iac cried out as her hair was singed, forcing her to release the alicorn.

"Aha!" the Matter-Horn said with a smirk. "Your mane may be scissors-proof, but not fireproof! Zapp! Summon some lightning!"

"You got it!" Zapp said.

She wriggled one of her hooves free so that she could grab hold of her pendant.

"Fili-Second, help Mare-velous get free," the Matter-Horn said, starting up her heat ray once again. "Zapp and I will burn her mane to a crisp."

The Mane-iac didn't look fazed by the Matter-Horn's threat. In fact, she only laughed and surprised every pony further by releasing her hold on her prisoners.

"Foals," she said. "Did you really think I would be so idiotic as to face you lot without having a plan?"

It had escaped the heroes' notice that one of her mane locks had

been reaching into the back room.

"On the contrary," she continued, "as an entrepreneur, I know how important it is to keep," she whipped out a large pink hairspray can, "insured!"

Before any pony could react, the Mane-iac pushed down on the can's nozzle and sprayed all around the room. Rarity hid under the sewing table as a pink cloud formed overhead. When the spray cleared, the Power Ponies were all frozen in place, their expressions stunned. The only parts of them that still moved were their blinking eyes, and apparently their mouths.

"W-What?" the Matter-Horn said. "H-How…?"

"Behold!" The Mane-iac cackled as she waved the giant can in their faces. "My Hairspray Ray of Doom! Stops you in your tracks and renders your powers useless!" She kissed the side of the can. "What do you think I stole all that glue for? A macaroni collage? I always knew double-majoring in chemistry and engineering would pay off. See?" She leaned towards her adversaries. "I'm more than just a pretty face."

"Boss!" Blowdry cried.

He and a few other henchponies had apparently also been affected by the hairspray and were standing stiff.

"Oh," the Mane-iac said, waving her hoof. "Don't worry, boys, the effects only last a minute. Unfortunately." She sneered at the heroes as she shook up her can. "Which is why we're going to have to keep spraying all of you." She looked around the room. "Whoever's *not* frozen, get the cage and lock them up!"

The Power Ponies yelled and grunted as they were dragged into a corner, into which Scissors and Comb were pushing a large metal cage. The heroes were locked up and the hairspray can was placed in front, pointing directly at them.

"It's funny," the Mane-iac said, slithering over to her prisoners and placing her hooves on the bars. "I really thought you'd be harder to

defeat. Guess I'm too brilliant for you. Now," she said, her mane locks reaching into the cage, "let's see what's under those masks, shall we?"

The Matter-Horn winced as a mane lock tugged at her mask. But it wouldn't budge.

"What?" the Mane-iac said as she attempted to pull off Mare-velous' mask. "What's this?"

The Matter-Horn smiled smugly. " *We* were prepared too, Tangler. See, we expected failure just as much as success. I mean you think this is the first time I've been captured by a supervillain? Of course you'd be tempted to uncover our identities! That's why I cast a spell on our costumes so that only *we* can take them off. That includes our masks."

"Smart move," Mare-velous murmured in admiration.

"And good luck trying to figure out *our* secret identities!" Zapp said.

"Yeah!" Fili-Second exclaimed. "We don't even wear masks!"

The Mane-iac groaned in annoyance. Then, after studying the heroes, she grinned maliciously.

"Very well. If I can't take those masks off the normal way," she said, pulling out a switchblade, "I'm just going to have to peel them off your skin."

The Power Ponies shrunk back at the sight of the blade glinting under the lamplight.

"Boy," Zapp said with a gulp. "She's not kidding around, is she?"

"Lady," Fili-Second said, "you loco in the coco!"

She put her hoof to her chest. "You flatter me. It's a real shame that I have to do this. We could've had so many glorious battles together."

As the Mane-iac moved the blade between the bars, Rarity let out a

gasp and raced over to the cage.

"No, wait!" She threw herself between the villain and the cage. "Please, Dee, don't hurt them!"

"I'm afraid I have to, Rarity dear," the Mane-iac said. "They'll only get in the way of my revenge against Twilight Sparkle."

The Matter-Horn blinked. "Twilight Sparkle?"

"Of course! She's the reason my company was shut down! The reason I became *this* !" She gestured to her mane.

"If you ask me," Zapp said with a snort, "it's an improvement."

The Mane-iac growled. "Why, you… Wait." She counted the heroes in the cage. "Isn't there usually one more of you?"

Rarity's eyes widened as an idea occurred to her. "Err…yes! Radiance! They must've…left her behind for backup! Yes!"

"Huh?" Fili-Second said.

Rarity winked at her before turning to the Mane-iac. "You can't destroy all the Power Ponies without them all here. These heroes are worth more to you alive than dead. Without them, you don't have the bait to lure Radiance here. She's sure to come to her friends' rescue soon, don't you think?"

Scratching her chin with her mane, the villain studied the prisoners. "You may have a point, Rarity dear. I suppose keeping them alive a little longer might be…beneficial." She noticed Fili-Second's leg twitch. "Stand back for a moment."

The Mane-iac and Rarity both stepped aside while the former pressed down on the hairspray can with her mane, coating the heroes in another dose of the spray.

"But how would Radiance even know where to come?" the Mane-iac questioned.

"Their tower!" Rarity exclaimed, forcing a grin. "Get the message to

the tower and she's sure to get it! I mean don't they usually leave some pony there to watch it?"

She glanced at her teammates as she said this. Their eyes all widened in realization.

"Oh, yes!" Zapp said.

"Most definitely!" the Matter-Horn said.

"Sure thing!" Mare-velous said.

"You can't tell, but I'm nodding right now," Fili-Second said.

"Very well then," the Mane-iac said. "Scissors! Stay by the Hairspray Ray of Doom. Get an egg timer, spray our guests every minute! Rarity dear," the Mane-iac said, cupping Rarity's chin with her mane, "do get back to those uniforms. I want them ready for the Charity Ball this evening."

Rarity blinked. "The Charity Ball? You mean…you're still going?"

" *We're* still going. And of course." The Mane-iac straightened out her jumpsuit. "I *never* fail to make a public appearance. By the way," she said as she turned away, "nice to see you finally embracing the evil, darling. It looks good on you."

Rarity waited until the Mane-iac was across the room and the minions were too far away to hear. When she was sure it was safe, she turned to her friends.

"Is Spike still at the tower?" she whispered. "Blink once for yes, two for no."

"What if I have to blink for real?" Fili-Second whined.

"Shush!" Mare-velous hissed before making eye contact with Rarity. "You know we can still talk, right?"

"Yes, Spike's still at the tower," the Matter-Horn said. "He's trying to locate the bomb on Coco."

"Can't you use your magic to get the keys or something?" Zapp asked.

Rarity sighed. "Unfortunately, Dee seems to favor magic-proof metal. That's why I couldn't get the remote for the explosive device on Coco. No doubt she did the same with this cage and possibly the keys."

The Matter-Horn rolled her eyes. "I *told* Starlight Glimmer not to make that metal available to the public!" She sighed. "Seems like Spike and Coco are our only hopes right now. But until then…"

"I know," Rarity said. "I'll stall for time as long as I can." She traced her ear where the communication device was implanted. "I just hope those two can handle something like this."

Back at Power Ponies Headquarters, Spike was scaling the metal detector up Coco's body.

"Try not to shake so much," he said as he reached her knees.

"I can't help it!" Coco exclaimed. "The thought that I could just blow up at any moment…"

"Calm down. We'll find it."

"I'm also worried about Rarity. I mean…I had the bracelets. I could've helped her, but…" She sighed. "I don't know, I was just so scared I couldn't think…"

"Hey, I get it." He was now scanning her stomach. "I know how it feels to be…well, useless." He went to her torso. "I mean…Twilight can do all these incredible things. She can freeze stuff, melt stuff, even make wings grow out of her back! Spread out your forelegs."

She did as he said so that he could scan each foreleg.

"Not to mention she's the head of this huge company," he continued, "and helps millions of ponies every day, both as the Masked Matter-Horn *and* billionaire Twilight Sparkle." He examined her neck. "And

I'm just stuck here, telling her what's up and where to go. And when it becomes too much for her, does she ask me to help? No. She just calls up these super-powered strangers as backup!" He proceeded to her head. "Don't get me wrong, I like them all, but…I just wish they'd give me a chance to…you know, help them out for real."

"At least you actually do stuff," Coco said. "I mean…since Rarity got those bracelets, I've gotten hit by a car, nearly suffocated by a crazed mane mutant, and planted with a bomb! Your work at least warrants that of an assistant. I'm more of a damsel in distress than anything."

"Hey!" Spike said as the metal detector beeped. "I think I've got something! Hold still." He raised his claw and started combing it through her hair. "Just as I thought." He pulled out a tiny circular metal device the size of a nit. "Figures. What with Dee Tangler being obsessed with hair and all."

He threw the metal bug to the ground and then jumped onto it, crushing it instantly.

"Guess it wasn't dragon-proof," he said with a laugh. "I gotta tell the girls." He rushed to the monitor and opened the communication channel. "Spike to Power Ponies. The bomb on Coco has been located and disposed of. There's nothing the Mane-iac can use against you now, Rarity."

Spike grinned proudly as he waited for a reply. Then a minute of silence passed. Frowning, he tried again.

"Power Ponies, do you copy? Twilight? Applejack? Rarity? Dash? Pinkie? Any pony?"

Still nothing.

"What's going on?" Coco asked, rising from the couch.

"Something's wrong," Spike said. "I mean I know Rarity has to be careful about what she says, but I'd expect at least one of the others to answer."

Just then, Rarity's voice came through the monitor. " *I must say,*

Dee, very few villains have been successful in capturing the Power Ponies. "

"It's Rarity!" Spike cried, turning back to the monitor.

Coco gulped. "Did she just say the Power Ponies were…captured?!"

"Shush! We need to hear this!"

" *And that whole Hairspray Ray of Doom was a brilliant touch* ," Rarity continued in a tone of mocking praise. " *Mixing superglue with hairspray to freeze them so that they can't use their powers! Marvelous!* "

"Oh no," Coco squeaked.

" *But it might be a while before Radiance shows up to rescue them. You should consider feeding them. All prisoners are entitled to a last meal, after all. Who knows? Radiance might not show up before the Charity Ball.* "

"The Charity Ball!" Spike said. "That's tonight! Twilight and I have tickets!"

"Rarity's been talking about that all week," Coco said.

" *But are you definitely sure Twilight Sparkle, the mare you want revenge on, is going to be there?* "

Spike gasped. "So that's her plan. The Mane-iac's planning to get her revenge on Twilight at the Charity Ball tonight."

"But…" Coco said in thought. "Twilight's not gonna be there because…"

"The Matter-Horn's already in the Mane-iac's clutches!"

"And Radiance is not going to try to save her friends because…"

"Rarity's *also* already in the Mane-iac's clutches! Rarity must be trying to stall for time until we find a way to help them escape."

"But what can we do? Call the police?"

Spike scoffed. "You think they stand a chance against the Mane-iac? She's captured the most powerful ponies in Maretropolis for crying out loud! No. *We're* the only ones who can save our friends now."

Coco's eyes widened. "B-But…you said so yourself! The Mane-iac just took down the most powerful ponies in Maretropolis! How are *we* supposed to defeat her?! We don't have powers! I can't even get these stupid bracelets to work!"

"Coco!" Spike said, grabbing her face. "Listen to me. Our friends are in danger and we're the only ones who know where to find them. The Mane-iac doesn't know about us. She won't see us coming. We may not have super powers, but we love our friends. So…we gotta at least try, right?"

After a moment's hesitation, Coco sighed in relent. "I'll…I'll do what I can to help Rarity and the others. But still, how can we fight the Mane-iac?"

"Hmm," Spike said, leaping off his chair. "Let's see…"

He began pacing the room. This went on for about an hour. Coco, exhausted from the night's events, had fallen asleep on the couch. Suddenly, a beep sounded from the monitor, forcing Coco to wake.

"What? What happened?"

"The analysis on the Mane-iac's hair is complete," Spike said, rushing over to his rolling chair. Onscreen was a picture of green hair strands. "According to the computer, it definitely shares strands of Dee Tangler's original DNA, but it's been corrupted by the same chemicals that were in her mane growth formula."

Coco stepped up to his side. "So…what does that mean?"

"When that live wire fell into the formula while Dee Tangler was still in there, it must have induced a chemical reaction that not only grew her mane, but pretty much brought it to life!"

"So you're saying that her mane was mutated by a…electrified shampoo job?"

After taking a moment to think on that, Spike nodded. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Wow," Coco said, looking at the screen. "I recognize some of these ingredients. It's stuff you find in most haircare products." She couldn't help but snort in amusement. "Without all that radioactive stuff, this is basically a heavily shampooed mane."

Spike's eyes widened in excitement. "That's it!"

"What's it?"

"I have a plan," he said, pointing to Coco. "But you're gonna have to learn how to use those bracelets before tonight."

Coco looked back at the couch where the bracelets lay. "Me? But I don't…"

"You have to try! For Rarity!" He started listing things on his claw. "We're also gonna need some formal attire, some cool costumes, Twilight's holo-matic, and an extra set of hooves."

"What set of hooves? What's a holo-matic?"

Instead of answering her, he opened the communication channel and said, "Rarity, girls, I know you can't answer me right now, but Coco and I have a plan to get you out. But we can't put it into action until tonight, so hang in there." Tears started forming in his eyes. "We won't let you down."

It was a slow day at the Maretropolis Museum, but Fluttershy preferred small crowds anyway. On her way to the sculpture garden, she passed by the museum curator, who looked disgruntled about something.

"Good morning, Mr. Fetlock," Fluttershy said with a pleasant smile.

"You!" Mr. Fetlock exclaimed, pointing to her. "Statue Girl! You're a friend of Miss Dash, aren't you?"

She shrunk back in fear. "Um…m-m-maybe?"

"Well you tell your friend to get her sorry flank over here, or call me and tell me why she hasn't come in for work today! She promised she'd help rearrange the Anugypt exhibit! Do you have any idea how hard it is to move seven-foot-tall jackal statues?!" He grunted loudly as he stomped away. "That lazy, good for nothing…"

Fluttershy watched him leave in bewilderment. She knew Rainbow Dash often made excuses to leave work early so she could fight crime, but it wasn't like her to miss work without an explanation. Bringing out her cell, Fluttershy dialed Rainbow. After several tones, all that came was a voice message.

" *Hi, this is Rainbow Dash. I can't come to the phone right now cuz I'm busy at the museum or I'm on an adventure with Daring Do. Either way, it's awesome. Please leave a message after the beep.* "

Fluttershy put her phone away. *She's probably off with the Power Ponies somewhere,* she thought.

She proceeded to the sculpture garden. Through all the years she had come here, she had memorized the entire layout of the outdoor exhibit. From the broken statue of Aphrodite, to the flag-bearing statue of Victory. But there was one statue that always had her undivided attention.

In the middle stood a very tall statue of a dragon-like creature with assorted body parts. His eagle claw was spread upward, his lion paw lay over his chest, and his large jaw was open so wide, his eyes were closed. It was almost as if the creature were laughing, or singing.

Fluttershy seated herself at his goat hoof and dragon foot, right beside the "Do Not Touch" sign. She looked up at the peculiar statue.

"Hello, Discord," she murmured. Fortunately, there weren't a lot of

ponies there to hear her. "Doctor Fauna gave me the day off today, so I thought I'd visit you. After all, it's such a lovely day to be sitting in this garden, don't you think?"

As expected, there was no reply. Fluttershy sighed.

"You must think me silly. Talking to a statue. But ever since…well, since I found you and they told me who you were, I…I can't help but think that…maybe it really is you in there, and you're not a statue at all."

The statue remained silent.

"The history books say that…that you did really bad things to be put in there." She twiddled her hooves together. "Still, I…I can't imagine it being very comfortable in there, after thousands of years. I wonder if you can even hear me, or…" She hung her head. "If you even know that…that I'm here."

She looked back up. "I don't know why you did it. Why you tried to take over the world, or why you…you cursed me like this. But…well, seeing you, I…I wonder…if you ever had a friend to stop you from doing all that. I mean…looking the way you do, it must've been hard. Unless, you know, you're able to change form like all the other gods in the stories."

She shook her head with a laugh. "I'm rambling. You're probably tired of my rambling. If you can hear me, that is. I know I can be annoying, but…I just…I just like talking to you, that's all."

A tear started to fall down her cheek. "Every pony…expects so much of me. But you…you don't expect anything of me. At least I don't think so. I mean you never say otherwise." She wiped away the tear. "Why did you do this to me? Was there a reason? Or…was it just for fun?" She sniffed. "Either way, please undo it. I…I don't want to hurt any more ponies."

"Fluttershy!" a voice called.

Fluttershy turned. "Spike?"

The little dragon was running toward her, breathing heavily. "We…

need…help."

She stood up. "Spike, what is it?"

He panted as he stopped and put his claws on his knees. "Rarity, Twilight, the girls, they…they've been captured!"

Fluttershy gasped. "Captured?"

"By that crazy shampoo lady, Dee Tangler! She's become a mutant mane monster called the Mane-iac!" He paused to scoff. "Try saying that ten times fast."

"The Power Ponies have been captured? Rainbow and…Applejack too?"

"Yes!"

Fluttershy's mouth fell open. "I…I didn't see Applejack at breakfast, but…I just assumed she'd been out late. I mean it's not the first time…and Rainbow, she…I didn't realize it was that…"

"We can panic later," Spike said, grabbing her hooves. "Listen, Rarity's friend Coco Pommel and I have a plan to save them. But we're going to need your help!"

"Me?!" she squeaked. "B-B-But…how can *I* help?"

"Well, not *you* , you. The *other* you."

Upon realizing to what he was inferring, she pulled her hooves out of his grasp. "Oh no. No! I already told you I wasn't going to…to turn into that *monster* again!"

"Fluttershy, when you're that monster, you're stronger than all the Power Ponies combined! It's the only chance we have to defeat the Mane-iac and her minions!"

"No," Fluttershy said, turning her face away. "I won't do it. I refuse to hurt any pony else!"

Spike groaned. "This isn't like last time, Fluttershy! You *need* to

change into that monster to save our friends! You've known Rainbow Dash since you were fillies, and Applejack's your roommate! Do you *want* them to die?!"

Fluttershy stiffened at the thought of two of her dearest friends dying. "But…what if I lose too much control and…I hurt my friends instead of their captors?"

"If it means saving our friends from certain doom, isn't it worth the risk?" Spike carefully grabbed her face so she could look at him. "Fluttershy, everything happens for a reason. You were given these powers for a reason. Don't you think *this* is it?"

Fluttershy glanced up at the statue of Discord, as if he were to give an answer. Of course, he didn't. But Spike had a point. There must have been a reason Discord had cursed her. What if it wasn't to spread chaos like she had always thought? What if, after all those years in stone, Discord had taken the time to think about what he'd done, that he wanted to do good instead of evil? Only, since he couldn't do good while in stone, he had given Fluttershy the power to do good for him?

Maybe she was overthinking this. Still, her friends were in danger, friends who had stopped her from destroying the city, friends who had remained loyal even after discovering her secret, friends who had believed in her even when she didn't believe in herself.

Now was the time to repay them for all their kindness and heroism.

The Mane-iac was pacing around the warehouse, her mane acting as her hooves. "Where is that confounded Radiance?! It's been almost a full day now since I slid that note under her door!"

Rarity was dressed in a purple sequin gown, sitting while Comb and Scissors curled her mane. The Mane-iac had insisted her "companion" be dressed and have her mane done for the ball. After all, it was still a high society event, even if they were crashing it.

"R-Relax, Dee!" Rarity said, trying to sound reassuring. "She's, err,

probably just waiting for you to leave! That's it! I mean…Radiance is no idiot, she wouldn't try to save her friends while some pony as powerful and, err, *clever* as you is holding down the fort!"

The Mane-iac stopped. "You do have a point." She looked at the wall clock. "It's almost time for the," her eyes rolled around, " *mane* event, anyway. Minions!"

Her henchponies were now all dressed in purple-and-white-striped vests that made them look like barbers. The Mane-iac had had them dye their manes green and powder their coats white. She had also used a stencil to spray paint a brush cutie mark on each flank. The makeovers had been done so precisely, the stallions might as well have been clones.

"Half of you will remain here with the Stylists," the Mane-iac said.

"Aw!" Scissors complained. "We're not coming to the party?"

She glared at him. "Got a problem?"

He shrunk back. "Err…no!"

"Good." She turned back to the henchponies. "Watch the prisoners. If Radiance comes while we're gone, use the Hairspray Ray of Doom on her and put her with the rest. When I get back," she said, cracking one of her mane locks like a whip, "I'll give them a nice, close shave."

Rarity gulped as Scissors and Comb finished with her mane and stepped back.

"Oh, Rarity darling," the Mane-iac said, clasping her hooves together, "you look absolutely exquisite! You're sure to catch every stallion's eye at the ball!"

"No kidding," Rarity grumbled, glancing at her bizarre companion. "Dee, it's not too late to…"

She was cut off as the Mane-iac scooped her up in her hair. "Come! We mustn't be late for our big debut! Minions, to the ball!"

Half the henchponies followed her out the door, cheering. Rarity managed to wriggle one hoof free so she could press down on her communication device.

"Yes, yes!" she said, pretending to cheer with the rest. "To the ball! Yes! You, me, and half the henchponies!" The rest she said under her breath so only Spike could hear. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Back inside the warehouse, the egg timer went off.

"Better go spray them again," Shampoo said.

"I got it," Comb said, climbing up the ladder so he could press down on the nozzle.

The Power Ponies closed their eyes as they were coated in spray again. Fili-Second coughed.

"I can't feel my nostrils!" she said in a raspy voice.

"Spike better figure out a way to get us out soon," Zapp whispered. "I *really* need to go to the bathroom!"

"And what's the Mane-iac gonna do when she realizes Twilight Sparkle's not gonna be at the ball?" Mare-velous whispered to the Matter-Horn.

"Even worse," the Matter-Horn murmured, "when she realizes Radiance is not coming. It's all up to Spike now."

"What's he gonna do? He's just a kid! I mean, how exactly can he get us out of…?"

"Um…" a soft voice said. "Excuse me?"

Every pony looked to the other end of the room where a masked mare crawled out from behind a pile of boxes. She was a pegasus with yellow fur and teal eyes that shone through her purple mask. Her pink mane and tail were brushed back in a way that it looked like they were flying in the wind. She wore a teal jumpsuit with a frilly pink collar. A purple scarf with a daisy pin was wrapped around her

neck, and on her front hooves were two pink beaded bracelets each with a large yellow butterfly. The henchponies stared at her curiously.

"Um," she said, meekly lowering her head. "If…if you wouldn't mind, I…I would greatly appreciate it if…if you'd let my friends go right now." She shrunk back. "Err, please."

Mare-velous squinted at the mare and then widened her eyes in recognition. She exchanged a glance with Zapp and could tell that she had reached the same conclusion.

The henchponies roared into a collective fit of laughter.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Blowdry said, slapping his knee. "Mistress Meek-Mare?!"

The mare bit her lip. "Um, no, I…actually, I haven't quite decided on my name yet…"

"She's Saddle Rager!" Fili-Second shouted.

The other Power Ponies glanced at her.

"What?" she said. "You all knew she was gonna join us eventually. One of us had to think of a name for her."

"Saddle Rager?" Scissors scoffed. "And what's your power? *Saddling* us with your pathetic begging?!"

This made the stallions laugh harder. Saddle Rager took a step back as she was reminded of the colts who had bullied her at flight camp, how they had laughed at her, how they had ridiculed her. It made her feel ridiculous…but something else. Already she felt heat rising in her chest.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the Matter-Horn said.

"And why not?" Shampoo asked. "What's she gonna do?"

"I say we spray her and put her with the others," Comb said.

"Why bother?" Blowdry said, stepping towards her. "Look at her. It's not like she can do anything."

Comb saw the intention in his eyes. "Blowdry…"

"What? The boss didn't want us touching her mare Friday." He smiled wickedly at Saddle Rager. "Didn't say anything about this one."

He grabbed her foreleg. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Let go," she said, her voice becoming hoarse.

He chuckled. "Or what?"

Saddle Rager locked gaze with him as her eyes suddenly became red. The laughs of the henchponies, and the colts at flight camp, echoed in her head. They were making her blood boil with fury.

She was done being a pushover. She had been given this power for a reason. The sight of her friends, helpless to defend themselves, reminded her of that reason.

"Or," Saddle Rager said, surprising every pony with her sudden deep voice. "I," she said, her legs ripping through her costume as they became more muscular, "crush," Blowdry cried out as her grip tightened around his hoof and she began growing in size, "YOU!"

"What the…?" Scissors said, stepping back with the rest as they gazed up at the now much taller, much more muscular mare.

The Power Ponies smirked as the henchponies were too busy to notice the egg timer going off.

"Gentlecolts," Mare-velous said as she began wriggling her hoof free, "meet our new partner."

Maretropolis City Hall was packed with well-dressed ponies, all there to either support their favorite charities, or to earn publicity for showing up at a charitable event. A stage was set up with a podium.

Behind the red curtain, the stagehooves were tied up. The Mane-iac peered through the curtain.

"Where is that Twilight Sparkle?" she asked in annoyance. "She was supposed to be here!"

"Oh no," Rarity said unenthusiastically. "How tragic. Guess we should try this plan some other time."

The Mane-iac turned to her henchponies. "Are the sprinklers set?"

They nodded. Rarity looked at the villain nervously.

"Err… *what* sprinklers?"

The Mane-iac chuckled darkly. "When I give the signal, one of my minions will trigger the fire alarm, which will in turn set off the sprinkler system. Only, instead of sprinkling water, they will be sprinkling my special hairspray."

Rarity gasped. "You don't mean…?"

"Yes! The same hairspray I used for the Hairspray Ray of Doom! That will freeze every pony in this room, including the authorities and Twilight Sparkle herself, allowing me to nab her without having any pony else interfering! The spray will only last for a minute, leaving me with enough time to bring Twilight Sparkle to the stage, wrap my mane around her, and squeeze her to death in front of all these witnesses!"

She noticed Rarity's fearful quivering. "Oh, but don't worry, darling." She wrapped a lock around the unicorn's shoulder. "I disabled the sprinklers backstage, so we won't be frozen."

"That's," Rarity said, using her magic to levitate the Mane-iac's mane off her shoulder, "not what I'm concerned about." She looked the villain in the eye. "Dee, this is more serious than robbing factories, kidnapping, and making threats. You're talking about *murder* here! Once you do this, there's no turning back!" She bravely took her hoof. "Please, Dee, as your friend, I *beg* you, one last time, to reconsider! Think of the consequences! You could go to prison for life!"

"Bah!" The Mane-iac let out a laugh. "You think I'm afraid of the police? Once the Power Ponies are out of the way, there will be no pony to stop me!"

"It's not just your freedom you'd lose, Dee." Rarity closed her eyes. "You'd lose me."

The Mane-iac blinked, looking genuinely worried. "W-What do you mean?"

Opening her eyes again, Rarity said, "That's the real reason you wanted me here, isn't it? It was never about uniforms. Unlike your minions, I was not just some hired help." She blinked as tears started welling up. "You…you actually care about me. Why else would you have commanded your ruffians not to lay a hoof on me? Why else would you have even bothered to bring me my favorite food? Even in your demented state, you still want my friendship.

"But friendship cannot be bought, Dee." She dropped the Mane-iac's hoof. "You can threaten me all you like, threaten the ones I love, strike me down for all I care! But if you do this, Dee, I…I won't be your friend anymore. When you are hauled away, when you are incarcerated for your crimes, I will not be there to defend you." She narrowed her gaze in determination. "There will be no pony left to care for you."

The Mane-iac stared at her in disbelief. Rarity almost could have sworn that she saw a tear in the corner of her green and red eye. For a fleeting moment, hope returned to Rarity's heart that Dee was coming to her senses.

Then the villain shook her head with a scowl. "You think it matters whether or not you care for me?" Her mane coiled around Rarity and pulled her closer. "I don't *need* your friendship! As long as you're here, doing whatever I say, what does it matter how you *feel* ?! Don't forget." She brought out her remote. "You have no choice."

She smirked at the device. "Maybe this will convince you."

A mane lock drew closer to the big red button.

"Boss!" one of the minions called. "I see Twilight Sparkle in the crowd!"

"What?" Rarity said in surprise.

The Mane-iac dropped her and rushed to the curtain opening. Sure enough, she spotted Twilight in a shimmering blue gown, accompanied by her dragon assistant. They were conversing with Starlight Glimmer, who wore a red ruffled gown.

"Excellent," the Mane-iac said. "Be ready to pull the switch on the fire alarm on my signal."

Still confused on how it was possible for Twilight to be at the party, Rarity pressed down on her communication device. "And when you activate the fire alarm, your spray which freezes every pony in their path and renders their magic useless will be sprayed through the sprinklers?"

The Mane-iac frowned. "Yes, I just told you that."

"Oh my! Good thing we are safe backstage! Every pony else is sure to get sprayed!" Rarity glanced through the crack in the curtain. "Unless they hide under the tables, of course!"

She really hoped Spike and Twilight, if that was her, were listening in.

"Ready," the Mane-iac said, raising her hoof. "Now!"

She threw down her hoof, signaling the henchpony to pull the switch. The fire alarm rang out throughout the ballroom. There were screams and gasps as the sprinklers were set off. Before long, there was silence. The Mane-iac chuckled lowly, gently rising to a maniacal cackle as she threw back the curtains. Every pony in the ballroom was completely frozen in place.

"Citizens of Maretropolis!" she said, rising up with the help of her mane. "It is I, Dee Tangler!"

There were some surprised gasps.

"That's right!" She laughed. "I'm back from the dead! And I'm better than ever before!" She looked around the room. "I hope you don't mind me putting a small stop to the party, but see, I've come to make a contribution to your little charity event, under the name of," she spread out her hooves, "the Mane-iac!"

She began crawling across the room, weaving her way through the throng of frozen ponies. "I'm going to do you all a favor by ridding this city," she spotted Starlight Glimmer and tipped her over for the heck of it, "of its most corrupt business pony! The one who destroyed my company and nearly killed me!" She faced her audience. "Twilight Sparkle!"

She frowned suddenly as she glanced around. "Where is she?"

Rarity peered through the curtains to see what was going on. The Mane-iac was searching frantically, pushing ponies over in the process.

"She was just here!" she shouted. "Where did she go?!"

"Sorry, Miss Tangler," said a voice.

The Mane-iac turned sharply as the source of the voice crawled out from beneath the buffet table. Rarity gaped in astonishment, for the mare standing before the Mane-iac was… *Radiance* ?

"But Twilight Sparkle had to leave early," said Rarity's costumed doppelganger. "She wasn't in the mood to be kidnapped and murdered today."

The Mane-iac growled. "Radiance. And here I was beginning to think you were too cowardly to come."

Radiance smirked. "Well, darling, I couldn't possibly miss one of the biggest events of the year."

"Enough talk." The villain's mane locks rose above her. "Let's get this over with!"

"I thought you'd never ask, darling."

As the Mane-iac's mane whipped towards Radiance, the latter lifted up a hoof. Rarity unmistakably recognized her pink bracelet, which was currently glowing. A pink bubble materialized around the doppelganger.

"Darling," Radiance said as the bubble disappeared. "You really have to do something about those mane extensions."

She summoned a pink cannon.

"Minions!" the Mane-iac called as she dodged an oncoming cannonball. "Attack!"

The henchponies began rushing out from backstage. Rarity, thinking fast, used her magic to take control of one of the curtains, wrap it around the henchponies and tie them all into a bunch.

"Rarity!" the Mane-iac shouted, ducking as Radiance shot a pink arrow.

"Oops," Rarity said, batting her eyes innocently. "My horn slipped."

The villain growled. "You traitor!" She brought out the remote. "You will pay for this!"

She cried out as a pink pebble knocked the remote out of her mane. She turned to see Radiance with a slingshot.

"That's it!" the Mane-iac yelled.

Faster than either of them could react, the Mane-iac whipped out two long mane locks, snatching up Radiance and Rarity. Laughing, she brought them to her face. Her grips around their middles tightened.

"Any last words?"

Radiance glanced over their captor's shoulder and smiled. "Yes. I hope you brought conditioner."

The Mane-iac blinked in confusion. "What?"

The villain cried out as her back was suddenly spurted with cold water. Her mane, soaked and heavy, fell limp all around her, in turn releasing Rarity and Radiance. So much of her mane had been above her that it fell on top of the Mane-iac, forcing her to the floor.

Standing directly behind her was a small purple dragon in a black mask, red cape, blue gloves and blue boots. Around his waist was a blue belt with a gold buckle. In his gloved claws was a hose.

"Spike?" Rarity muttered.

"Haircare 101, Mane-iac," the dragon said with a smile. "Hair is absolutely useless when wet." He tossed the hose away. "Good thing the Mayor keeps these things around in case of fire." He looked over at Rarity and winked. "You're welcome, my lady."

At this point, the effects of the Mane-iac's spray were wearing off and the guests were starting to move again. Those who could move their front hooves were clapping.

"That little dragon saved us!" one guest said.

"Who is he?" asked another.

Spike opened his mouth to answer when Starlight Glimmer said, "Ugh. His outfit is so…humdrum!"

He stiffened. "Humdrum?!"

"Hooray for Humdrum!" cheered a guest.

"What?" He held out his claws. "No, no, no! That's not…"

But the crowed didn't hear him as they started chanting, "Humdrum! Humdrum! Humdrum!"

He sighed. "Never mind."

Suddenly, the rest of the Power Ponies burst through the front doors. Saddle Rager was still in full monster mode.

"Alright, Mane-iac!" the Matter-Horn said. "Time to get your mane…"

She trailed off when she saw the Mane-iac on the floor. In the attempt to rise, she had wriggled herself into a mane cocoon. The Power Ponies glanced between the villain, then confusingly at Rarity and her superhero counterpart, then at Spike in a cape.

"Uh…" Zapp said. "What happened?"

"We, um," Spike said, laughing awkwardly with a shrug, "saved the day?"

The Mane-iac's mane and tail had been braided and chained. Her body was wrapped in a straightjacket as the authorities tossed her into the back of the padded van that would take her to Balkham Asylum.

"This is all a big misunderstanding, I swear!" she protested. "I'm innocent! A victim of circumstance!" She spotted Rarity, who was watching from a few feet away. "Rarity! Rarity dear, tell them! Tell them!"

Giving her a stern look, Rarity said. "Sorry, Dee." She crossed her forelegs. "I did warn you."

The Mane-iac stared at her, looking hurt as the doors were shut on her. Rarity hung her head in sadness, muttering, "Goodbye, my friend."

She turned around and walked into an alley where Spike and the other Power Ponies were gathered. Saddle Rager had reverted back to her original form.

"Alright," Rarity said, planting her hooves firmly on the ground. "Now that we're somewhere out of hearing," she turned to the Radiance imposter, "can some pony please explain to me who *that* ," she pointed, "is!"

The doppelganger grinned awkwardly. "S-Sorry for the deception, Rarity."

Radiance pressed down on her golden necklace and her

appearance altered. Rarity gasped when her double was revealed to be Coco with a metallic device strapped across her chest.

"B-B-But…" Rarity stammered. " *How* ?!"

"It was my idea," Spike said, proudly pointing to the device on Coco's chest. "See, before we had all of you girls for backup, the Matter-Horn had a hard time balancing crime fighting with her business life as Twilight Sparkle. So, if Twilight ever had to be someplace the same time as the Matter-Horn…"

He pressed a button on the device and Coco instantly changed into Twilight Sparkle in a blue gown.

"Usually I would be the one wearing it," Spike said, pressing the button to change Coco back, "but we needed a way to get Coco in without an invitation."

"I get it," Mare-velous said. "You knew the Mane-iac wouldn't strike until she was sure Twilight Sparkle would get caught in her trap."

"But we hid under the table before she could release her spray," Coco said. "Thanks for the tip, Rarity."

"This also will make ponies believe that I'm not Radiance," Rarity said. "Still, why did you feel it necessary to impersonate me?"

Coco showed her the bracelets. "These were the only things we had against the Mane-iac, and ponies were sure to ask questions if some other pony was going around with your bracelets."

"But how'd you two know hosing the Mane-iac down would put her mane out of commission?" Zapp asked.

"Easy," Spike said. "The computer showed that her mane was heavily shampooed. We figured if we just washed the shampoo out…"

"Her mane would fall flat!" Rarity exclaimed.

"Not to mention that her mane was started up by an electrical charge, and water doesn't mix well with electricity."

"Oh, that's brilliant!"

"Yeah, Spike!" Fili-Second said, zipping to his side to put her hoof around him. "Who knew you could be such a hero?"

"It was certainly brave of you," the Matter-Horn said, looking at him sternly, "but also risky. You could've gotten hurt, Spike."

"I know," Spike said, looking down at his boots. "I know it was dangerous. But I couldn't just sit around while you girls were in trouble." He faced the Matter-Horn. "You're my family, Twilight. And the rest of you, I couldn't leave you hanging either."

"Me neither," Coco said, looking at Rarity. "Not after all those times you had looked out for me."

"And me," Saddle Rager said, glancing at Mare-velous and Zapp. "If…if Spike hadn't convinced me, I…I don't know if I would've…"

Smiling, Mare-velous pulled her into a hug. "Thanks for comin', Sugar Cube."

"Yeah," Zapp said, wrapping her hooves around them both. "We knew you had it in ya."

"What do you think, Saddle Rager?" the Matter-Horn said. "Does this mean you'd reconsider our offer?"

Saddle Rager glanced around at all her friends and grinned. "If it means helping you all again, I'll do it."

She squeaked as Mare-velous and Zapp squeezed her harder. It became even more difficult to breathe when Fili-Second joined the embrace.

"Does that mean I can be a part of the team too?" Spike asked, clasping his claws together eagerly.

The Matter-Horn giggled. "You've always been a part of the team, Spike. But…if you want to be a part of the action," she said, pulling him close, "you've shown that you're more than capable of handling it."

"Hey, what about Coco?" Fili-Second asked, pulling out of the hug so Saddle Rager could breathe.

"Yes, yes!" Rarity said, taking her roommate's hooves. "Darling, you were positively heroic today! You simply *must* join us!"

Coco hung her head. "Rarity, I…I'm glad that I was able to help, but…" Sighing, she took off the bracelets. "Being a hero is your thing, not mine." She handed them to Rarity. "You were the one who found these, you're the one who should use them. But," she smiled softly, "if you ever need some pony to fill in your shoes…" She pressed the button on the holo-matic to transform herself into Radiance. "You know where to find me."

The Matter-Horn chuckled. "That'll certainly be useful to know."

"Hey, Power Ponies!" Chief Spitfire called.

Rarity quickly handed the bracelets back to "Radiance" as the Power Ponies turned their attention to the chief.

"Great job today," the chief said, looking between Saddle Rager and Spike. "Especially you newbies." She pointed over her shoulder. "The press is gonna wanna know the details of tonight. Want me to shoo them away for ya?"

The Matter-Horn glanced at her teammates and smiled. "No, officer, we'd be happy to answer any questions the press has."

As the Power Ponies followed the chief, Rarity gestured to Spike and said, "Come on, Humdrum."

He growled. "Okay, if I'm gonna be a part of this team now, I'm gonna need a cooler name than that! How about…?" He stuck out his claws. "Captain Claws!"

The mares laughed.

"No? How about the Daring Dragon? Super Scales? Mega Lizard? The Great Garbunkel? Come on! Anything but Humdrum!"

Back at the Maretropolis Museum, the statue of Discord stood still in the dark. Had any pony been there to witness it, they would have seen the small dark light pulsing in his chest, right where his heart would be. They would have also seen the light grow to a point where it was pulsing hard enough to make a teeny tiny crack.

And they would've heard the brief, low chuckle echoing from the statue's open mouth.

This was a monster of a chapter. I had to figure out particulars like how Spike, Coco and Fluttershy would be able to defeat the Mane-iac on their own, and how to explain the absence of Twilight and Radiance. Then I thought of what Batman usually does when both his personalities need to be in one place. And I had to think of how Rarity, who had handled herself with the Diamond Dogs, would not be able to escape on her own. I was going to have a scene where Spike coaches Coco in using Rarity's bracelets, but wanted to keep the surprise of the disguises.

BTW, hasn't anybody every wondered why whenever the superheroes are captured, the villains almost never attempt to unmask them before trying to destroy them?

Summer's begun, but I have a lot of projects and events to plan, so no fanfic updates for a while, but I can give you a hint of what's next. Let's just say it involves a certain dark king...

The Shadow King: Part 1

I lied, I got excited. I promise this saga won't be as lengthy as the first two.

" *...our impulses are too strong for our judgement sometimes"*

- Thomas Hardy

In a laboratory in Sparkle Labs, a dark unicorn stallion in a lab coat was looking at a test tube through his safety goggles. Closing his green eyes, he concentrated his magic on the serum inside. Purple bubbles emitted from his horn as the serum turned from red to dark purple.

Smiling, he turned to the white mice squeaking in a cage nearby. As he opened the cage with his magic, the mice scurried into one corner. The unfortunate mouse that was picked up by the unicorn's blue aura squealed and wriggled.

"Don't worry, little one," the unicorn said, magically sucking the dark purple serum into a syringe. "This won't hurt a bit."

The mouse squeaked as the needle was brought closer to her and pierced her skin. She went still. The unicorn then quickly switched the camera filming them to night mode, turned off the lights and waited. With the use of night-vision goggles, he watched the mouse as she suddenly sprang to life and began twitching uncontrollably. There was a loud squeak and a flash of light that momentarily blinded the unicorn.

When his vision returned, he saw nothing.

He searched the dark room through the greenness of his goggles. Then he heard the sound of glass breaking. He looked over at the

racks of test tubes and saw that one rack had fallen over, shattering the tubes within it. But that wasn't all he saw.

Standing near the shattered glass was the silhouette of a mouse.

Gasping, the unicorn illuminated his horn. The mouse's fur had darkened greatly, but that wasn't all that had changed. For a split second, he saw that her eyes had become red. As soon as the light was lit, the mouse hissed like a cat and then the most miraculous thing happened.

The mouse went right through the wall and disappeared.

The stallion laughed as he removed his goggles and turned to the camera.

"Did you see that?" he said joyfully. "I did it! The mouse has become pure shadow and was able to pass through that wall!" He turned on the lights. "This is even better than what I had imagined! What, with this serum, I could do…"

He stopped when a knock came at the door. Switching off the camera and levitating the test tube with the remaining serum into his coat pocket, he faced the door.

"Come in."

His secretary opened the door, saying, "Miss Sparkle and her assistant are here for a progress report."

"Oh, yes," he said, clearing his throat. "Of course."

Twilight and Spike, who was carrying a clipboard, entered the laboratory.

"We just wanted to see how things were going, Dr. Sargon," Twilight said with a smile.

"Yeah, with the," Spike said, checking his notes, "dark magic?"

Dr. Sargon rolled his eyes. "It's *shadow* magic. And I can assure you, Mr. The Dragon, it's much different from what ponies call 'dark

magic.' You see, while any evil or harmful magic is called 'dark,' shadow magic merely deals with the nature of darkness, as in the absence of light rather than the absence of good."

"He's right, Spike," Twilight said. "You know I would never hire some pony involved in dark magic."

"I didn't say you did," Spike said. "But what's the point of shadow magic if it's not…well, *dark* ?"

She turned to the stallion. "Why don't you answer his question by explaining the purpose of your research, Sombra?"

"Gladly," Sombra said. "You see, shadows can be seen as two-dimensional copies of three-dimensional objects or beings. Unlike us, however, our shadows have the freedom to transcend reality."

"What does that mean?" Spike asked.

"Allow me to demonstrate."

Sombra switched on a desk lamp and pointed it at the wall. He placed his hoof in front of the light.

"You see my hoof's shadow there?" he asked.

"Yes," Spike said.

"Notice what happens when I move my hoof closer to the lamp?"

As Sombra did this, Spike nodded and said, "Your shadow gets bigger."

"Correct. But my hoof in actuality hasn't changed at all, only my shadow. Now watch this."

He twisted his front hooves together and made a shadow on the wall that looked like a ribbon tied in a knot.

"Nice shadow puppeteering," Spike said in awe.

"You see?" Sombra said. "For a moment I let you think my shadow

was of something else entirely." He switched off the lamp. "If only ponies had the same abilities as their shadows', it would solve many of the world's problems."

"Like what?" Spike asked, scribbling on his clipboard.

The scientist looked at them seriously. "It could cure ponies of their physical disabilities."

The tip of Spike's pencil snapped.

"It's true," Sombra said. "With my serum, ponies would be able to morph their shape as a shadow would, be able to move in ways they have only imagined."

Spike turned to his guardian. "He serious about this?"

Twilight nodded. "Have you had any luck with the serum so far?"

Sombra bit his lip. "I've, um, ran a few tests on some lab mice, but…" He glanced at where the shadow mouse had disappeared. "I haven't had much success yet."

"That's alright, Sombra. I understand this is very complex magic. Given how valuable your research has been so far, if you need more time to…"

Twilight was interrupted by a crackling voice in her ear, " *Mare-velous to Power Ponies! Mare-velous to Power Ponies! Requesting backup! Repeat, requesting backup!* "

Spike tapped his claw to his earhole, indicating to Twilight that he had heard the message too.

"I am…so sorry, would you excuse me, Dr. Sargon?" Twilight asked sweetly. "I just remembered I'm running late for a meeting."

"Of course, Miss Sparkle," Sombra said with a grin of understanding. "I'll let you know if there's any progress."

Twilight smiled as she shut the door. Then she put her hoof in her ear and whispered, "Mare-velous, did you say you were requesting

backup?"

" *Yup* ," Mare-velous said, grunting as if she was throwing a punch at someone.

"But…you never ask for backup."

" *Well I am now!* "

"I thought you didn't usually work during the day."

" *I* don't. *I was at my apple cart when…hey!* " There was a crash. " *This mechanical elephant stomped by and…* " There was a trumpeting sound. " *Look, I'm on Pachyderm and Kipling! Just send some pony over here!* "

Twilight sighed and looked down at Spike. "What's our schedule look like?"

He flipped through his clipboard. "Well, we still need to check up on the other researchers in this department, read seven research proposals, and you have a lunch date with that cop in half an hour." He looked up at her. "You sure it's a good idea to be dating when you have so much other stuff going on?"

"Just because I live a double-life doesn't mean I can't have a social life. Besides," she said with a blush, "Officer Sentry seems nice and it wouldn't hurt to get to know him a little better."

"Yeah." Spike glanced back at the clipboard. "But if you want to finish your work today *and* keep that date…"

"I can handle it, Spike."

"I know you can, and I like fighting crime as much as you, but… didn't you start that whole superhero team for a reason?"

She sighed. "As usual, Spike, you may be right." She pressed into her ear. "Matter-Horn to Power Ponies, any pony copy?"

Rainbow Dash was at the museum when she received the backup call from Mistress Mare-velous. Unfortunately, since there were too many ponies around, she was not able to answer the call until Twilight reported that she was too booked to add anything additional to her schedule.

" *I'm in the middle of a presentation,"* Rarity's voice whispered harshly into Rainbow's ear.

" *I'm neutering a dog* ," said Fluttershy's voice.

" *I'll be right there!* " Pinkie said.

"I'll be there too," Rainbow whispered. "Just give me a minute to slip away."

She was passing through the sculpture gardens when an angry voice called, "Miss Dash!"

Closing her eyes with a grunt, Rainbow turned to face her boss. "Mr. Fetlock, I was just heading for the bathroom…"

"Hold it in," Mr. Fetlock said, grabbing her hoof. "I need to show you something."

He dragged Rainbow Dash to the middle of the sculpture garden where the statue of Discord stood.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing to the statue.

Rainbow stared blankly at it. "I give up. What am I looking at?"

Groaning, Mr. Fetlock brought out a magnifying glass and shoved it into Rainbow's hooves.

"Look at its chest," he said gruffly.

Flapping her wings, Rainbow went up to the statue's chest-level. She looked through the magnifying glass and examined the chest.

"There, do you see it now?" Mr. Fetlock demanded.

"See what?" she asked.

He groaned. "The crack! The two-inch crack in his chest!"

Rainbow looked through the magnifying glass again and saw that there was indeed a small crack imbedded in the statue's chest. "Huh. So small I didn't see it."

"It wasn't there before!"

"How can you tell?" she asked, lowering herself back to the ground.

He huffed. "I know this museum like the back of my hoof! Every peel in every painting, every faded letter on every parchment, every crack in every statue! And *that* was *not* there when I checked it last week!"

Rainbow shrugged. "The statue's at least two thousand years old…"

"Statues don't just start cracking for no good reason! We have a saboteur!"

She rolled her eyes. "If it'll make you happy, I'll check the surveillance footage…"

"See that you do! Just find out who's responsible for desecrating this historic work of art!"

"I'll get right on…"

" *Hello?!* " Mare-velous said in her ear. " *Still needin' that backup!* "

"Uh…" Rainbow backed away from her boss. "I'll get right on it once I get back from the bathroom!"

Mr. Fetlock frowned. "Didn't you take a bathroom break fifteen minutes ago?"

She forced a laugh. "You know how we mares are! We spend half our lives in the bathroom!"

When her boss turned away, Rainbow broke into a run, muttering under her breath, "Mare-velous is gonna kill me."

"I'll be right there!" Pinkie said to Mare-velous through her communication device.

Pinkie began walking out of the rock quarry, planning to speed up once she was out of view of her family, when her father grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I was, just um…" Pinkie said, shifting from hoof to hoof. "Lunch break?"

He shook his head. "You're not going anywhere until you finish breaking that boulder there."

"But…"

She looked back at the ten-foot-tall boulder which so far she had only chipped with her pickaxe. Of course, the process would go along faster if she could go at full speed, but she had not told her family about that yet.

"No buts," Igneous Rock said, shoving her pickaxe at her. "Every pony pulls their weight around here. The sooner you get done, the sooner you can have lunch."

Sighing, Pinkie took the pickaxe and walked back to the boulder. "Be done in a sec, Pa."

Meanwhile, Mistress Mare-velous was doing her best to keep the giant robotic elephant currently tearing up the town at bay. She wished her lasso worked the same on objects the way it did on living beings. She had already attempted to tie it up, but since it was not a living being that struggled, she could not get a tight enough grip on it, and the rope would slip off. She had never had to face obstacles like this in Appleloosa.

"Where are y'all?!" Mare-velous said into her communication device, ducking as a metal trunk swung at her. "The *one* time I ask for help

and none of y'all show up?!"

" *Zapp and Fili-Second haven't shown up yet?* " Spike asked.

The elephant's trunk swatted at a stallion with a baby carriage. Thinking fast, Mare-velous lassoed the trunk, holding it long enough for the father to get away with his foal. Just as it had last time, the rope slid off the sleek metal.

"No," Mare-velous said in answer to Spike's question. "And I can't hold off this fella much longer!"

" *I would've thought Fili-Second would at least be there already,* " Twilight said.

"If you're so concerned," Mare-velous said, rolling out of the way before the elephant could step on her, "feel free to lend a hoof!"

"How 'bout a wing?" Zapp asked as she flew in.

Mare-velous scowled up at her. "What took ya so long?!"

"Couldn't get away." She whistled when she saw the robot. "That's one big elephant. Any idea whose it is?"

The earth mare shrugged. "Some loony scientist who lost her job. Now, I think we should…"

"Don't worry!" Zapp said, holding up a hoof. "I'll just short-circuit this baby with a little lightning!"

Mare-velous' eyes widened. "No, Zapp, wait!"

But Zapp didn't listen to her. She just zoomed up above the elephant and raised the Lightning Bolt in her hoof.

"By the power of Zeus…" she shouted as storm clouds began to form overhead.

"Zapp, don't!" Mare-velous called from down below.

"…King of the Olympian Gods…"

"Zapp, there are ponies around, and that robot's just gonna…"

"…I smite at thee!"

A great bolt of lightning struck the elephant. Strings of electricity circled it and the robot wobbled and shook. Ponies screamed as the asphalt beneath the elephant's metal feet suddenly exploded.

"What the…?" Zapp said.

"I tried tellin' ya!" Mare-velous yelled. "Lightning doesn't just strike metal, it…"

She stopped as another bolt struck, this one hitting a lamppost. Shrieking, Mare-velous quickly lassoed it before it could hit an old stallion.

"Zapp, stop that thing!" she shouted.

"Okay, right," Zapp said, hyperventilating. "Just…breathe and…"

But the storm continued, and that wasn't their only issue. The robot elephant was falling. It was falling towards a school bus of foals on a field trip.

"I'm here!" Fili-Second exclaimed as she appeared at Mare-velous' side.

"Fili!" Mare-velous cried. "Get those foals out of here!"

"Okay!"

She zipped over to the back of the bus and began pushing. Unfortunately, super strength was not among her powers. Mare-velous smacked herself in the forehead.

"Fili!" She spoke her next words slowly. "Get them *out* of the bus!"

"Oh, right!"

Fili-Second immediately abandoned her plan and zipped into the bus. She began bringing all the foals out one-by-one, but not fast

enough as the elephant was inches away from the bus' roof.

"Oh, for cryin'…" Mare-velous said.

She threw her rope to the lamppost on the other side of the robot, tightened it, and suspended the elephant from the bus.

"Fili!" Mare-velous called, gripping her rope. "Can't hold on for long!"

"All clear!" Fili-Second said, coming to her side and saluting. "They're all off the bus!"

Grunting, Mare-velous released the rope, allowing the elephant to fall onto the bus. Above, the storm was still brewing and growing larger by the minute. Screams were heard when a bolt struck the windows of an office building.

"Happy place, happy place…" Zapp repeated over and over with her eyes closed.

"Breathe, ya dummy!" Mare-velous shouted.

"I'm trying!" Zapp said, clutching her head. "It's hard to calm down when you're yelling at me!"

Suddenly, a blue beam was shot and the storm cloud was replaced with a block of ice. The ice came hurtling towards the street.

"Fili!" Mare-velous exclaimed.

"I'm on it!"

She zipped off and returned with a trampoline which she placed under the incoming ice block.

"Fili, no!" Mare-velous shouted, rushing towards her. "That's just gonna…"

But before she could stop her, the ice block bounced off the trampoline. Fili-Second had unintentionally held the trampoline up at an angle, so that the block flew into the pet store nearby. Cats screamed, birds shrieked and fish's tanks were shattered.

"Oops," Fili-Second said with an awkward grin. "Uh…better not tell Saddle Rager about that."

The Matter-Horn lowered herself to the ground, carrying a panicking Zapp in her hooves.

"H-Had…" Zapp stammered. "n-no idea you could freeze…c-c-clouds…"

"Neither did I," the Matter-Horn said, turning to her other colleagues. "Now what the heck happened here?"

Crossing her hooves, Mare-velous glared between Fili-Second and Zapp. "Ask *them* ."

To avoid giving the press something to gossip about, the four Power Ponies took their argument to headquarters.

"I called y'all for backup!" Mare-velous exclaimed, looking directly at Zapp and Fili-Second, who were shifting uncomfortably on the couch. "Not to make things worse!"

"Mare-velous, calm down," the Matter-Horn said. "Any pony can make a mistake. I've made mistakes sometimes."

"But y'all said you were gonna come help, and yet ya took yerr sweet time with it!"

"My boss caught me," Zapp said. "It took a few minutes for me to get away."

"We all have other commitments," the Matter-Horn said. "Don't forget *I* was much later than they were."

"I can forgive Zapp for bein' late," Mare-velous said, darting her eyes at Fili-Second, "but what's Miss Fastest-Thing-Alive's excuse?"

"It wasn't *my* fault!" Fili-Second said. "Pa saw me leaving and wouldn't let me go until I'd broken up this boulder…"

"And ya couldn't've used your super speed for that?!"

She furrowed her brow. "No! My family was watching! And it wasn't like I could be in two places at once! I'm not *that* fast! And even so I really needed to grab lunch cuz I burn so many calories running so fast that I needed to make sure I ate before the fight…"

"Bein' late doesn't even begin it!" Mare-velous threw her hooves in the air. "Zapp, ya started up that storm cloud without thinkin' about the civilians that might've gotten hurt in the process!" She looked back at Fili-Second. "Not to mention a whole bus of fillies and colts was nearly made into a pancake!"

"I got them out, didn't I?" Fili-Second said.

"And we defeated the robot!" Zapp said.

"There," the Matter-Horn said, clearing her throat, " *was* some collateral damage…"

"Thank ya!" Mare-velous said, turning back to Zapp. "And *how* ," she pointed to the bolt, "have ya not gotten control of that thing yet?!"

"Gimme a break, will ya?" Zapp said, clutching her pendant. "I've only been at this for a few months!"

"Exactly! You two are just too new at this!"

"AJ…" the Matter-Horn tried to say.

"No!" She held up her hoof. "They don't take this job seriously! They're too impulsive, doin' whatever they want without thinkin', to a point where they nearly jeopardized the entire mission!"

"You never treat Fluttershy like this," Zapp grumbled.

Mare-velous pointed at her. "Don't ya *dare* start with that! Fluttershy at least knows the seriousness that comes with this job! Why did y'all even sign up in the first place?! Rarity was triggered by her friend's injury, Fluttershy and Spike stepped up to save us!" Pointing to herself, she thrust her face in theirs. "I watched my parents' murder for cryin' out loud!

"And you? Why are *y'all* in this?" She looked at Zapp. "Cuz it's thrillin'?" Then she looked at Fili-Second. "Cuz it's *fun* ? This isn't a freakin' game! Ponies' lives hang in the balance! Does that matter to ya at all?!"

"Applejack!" the Matter-Horn shouted, using her magic to pull Mare-velous away from the other two. "That's enough!"

At this point, Zapp was scowling hard at Mare-velous and Fili-Second had tears welling up in her eyes.

"Look," the Matter-Horn said, stepping between them to avoid further conflict. "Mistakes were made, but the upside to mistakes is that we can learn from them." She faced Zapp. "Conjuring that storm with civilians present *was* a reckless decision." She turned to Fili-Second. "And I know we need to act fast, but we also need to take the time to think."

Glancing at Mare-velous, who had her hooves crossed, she said, "As we are a team, constructive criticism is always appreciated. *Yelling* isn't. If we're going to work together, we have to help each other through our mistakes rather than reprimand each other for them."

She waited for one of them to respond. When none did, she let out a sigh.

"Maybe we should plan some teambuilding exercises." The Matter-Horn glanced between them. "Or, at the very at least, you three should strive to spend more time together. Go to a movie, get a coffee…"

"Last thing *she* needs," Mare-velous grumbled, tilting her head towards Fili-Second, "is more caffeine."

"Mare-velous…" the Matter-Horn said warningly.

"No," Fili-Second said, shaking her head. "She's right."

" *Twilight!* " Spike said through the communications channel. " *Your lunch!* "

The Matter-Horn gasped. "Um…"

"We heard," Zapp said bluntly. "Go."

"Right." She looked at them all once more. "At least promise you'll *try* to get along."

They all mumbled their agreements as she flew out of the room. Mare-velous stared at Zapp and Fili-Second for a long time with her condescending glare. Finally, she shook her head and stomped out. Once she was gone, Zapp angrily pounded the couch cushion.

"We screw up *one* time," she said between her teeth, "and she hammers down on us like we're a couple of fillies!"

"She's," Fili-Second said, twiddling her hooves, "not wrong, you know?"

The pegasus stared at her. "Whaddya mean?"

Fili-Second bit her lip. "Why *did* we become heroes? I mean I have no tragic backstory like dead parents or watching my friend get severely injured or growing up with an extreme case of dissociative disorder or…" She frowned. "Hey, has Twilight every told us her backstory?"

Zapp opened her mouth and then froze. She turned back to where the Matter-Horn had exited.

"She," she said unsurely, "must've told us at some point. Right?"

"Anyway," Fili-Second said, looking down at her hooves, "what are *our* backstories? I drank some radioactive coffee and decided it would be…fun to be a superhero."

"But *I* have a good reason!" Zapp insisted. "When I first picked up the Lightning Bolt, Daring Do was in trouble and it was so thrilling that I wanted to hold it again and feel awesome and…" She trailed off and groaned as she leaned back on the couch. "Ugh, she's right. We have no idea what we're doing, do we?"

Fili-Second neither agreed with nor contradicted her. Instead, they

sat there in silence for quite a while.

"I…better get back to the museum," Zapp said, flapping her wings, "see about some sculpture vandals."

"And I better get back to the rock farm and," Fili-Second said with a heavy sigh, "chip at some rocks."

At a café, Flash Sentry, still in uniform, was sitting at a table by the window. Every now and then he would check his watch. Soon, Twilight Sparkle in her purple pantsuit came rushing into the café.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, seating herself across from him and setting her purse down. "Meeting went on longer than I thought."

"I get it," Flash said with a grin. "I'm a cop. I know more than any pony that when duty calls, you answer it."

She smiled back. "Thank you for understanding."

"With the duties you have, you're probably called for all the time."

Twilight frowned. "W-What do you mean by that?"

"You know." He leaned back in his seat. "Running such a big business all by yourself."

"Right." She let out a sigh of relief. "Well, I'm not running it entirely by myself. There's Spike."

"Your dragon," he said with a nod. "You know, I always wondered, how did you get a dragon to be your assistant?" His expression was suddenly one of worry. "Or…is that too personal to discuss on a first date?"

"No, no," she said, waving her hoof. "It's fine." She brushed back a loose bang. "I was eighteen, in my first year of college."

"Oh, where'd you go?" He winced. "Sorry, I interrupted."

"You're good." She giggled. "Canterlot University. My roommate and I were coming back from an off-campus party." She twirled a lock of her hair with a blush. "I…wasn't much of a party girl back then. My roommate had practically *dragged* me over there!"

She frowned. "We…we were walking by an alley when we saw these ponies loading crates into a truck. They looked a bit shifty, glancing nervously over their shoulders. Thinking they were up to no good, my roommate and I ducked behind a dumpster.

"She was saying we should get out of there and forget we ever saw this, that we might get in trouble, but then one of the loaders dropped a crate and it spilled. We heard…cracks." She closed her eyes, breathing in sharply. "They had eggs, Flash. Not chicken eggs, but *dragon* eggs."

Flash's eyes widened. "Dragon traffickers?"

Twilight nodded.

"You should've just reported it in."

"I was about to, but then…they saw us and…"

"And what?" Leaning forward, he grabbed her hoof. "Were you hurt?"

Glancing down at his hoof, she smiled softly at his concern. "Would you believe I fought them off?"

He scoffed. " *You* ?"

Her smile vanished. "You don't think I can fend for myself?"

"No, no, no!" he said, holding up his hooves. "I just…took you as more of the intellectual type than the fighting type."

She blushed. "Well, I had studied magic my whole life, so I knew a few defensive spells." She sighed sadly. "Unfortunately, I was still outnumbered. My roommate shouted at me to get out of there. There was this purple, polka-dotted egg that was next to me. It had fallen out of the crate but hadn't broken. I figured…if I couldn't save

them all I could at least…save one.

"I was on my way to turn it over to the police, but…it hatched before I got there." She smiled a little. "The minute I looked into his big, reptilian eyes I…we…we connected."

She wiped away a small tear. "Eventually, the police were able to dismantle the dragon trafficking ring and return the surviving eggs to the Dragon Lands. But…the dragons wouldn't take back the one that had hatched, saying that he had already," she coughed, "well, *imprinted* on me, and Dragon Law prohibits that any hatchlings be taken away from their attachment figures, as it would devastate them.

"So in the eyes of the dragons, I was Spike's legal guardian, and, thanks to a lot of court proceedings, I'm just that in the eyes of ponies too. He's hardly left my side ever since."

"That's quite a story," Flash said. "To think, you helped take down a whole dragon trafficking ring!" He winked. "You're about as heroic as the Masked Matter-Horn."

"Excuse me?" Twilight said, her voice squeaking slightly.

"The Masked Matter-Horn, she's my favorite of the Power Ponies." He sighed as he stared wistfully up at the ceiling. "She's so brave, so fearless, so smart." He looked back at her. "But you're like that too, except you help ponies in your own way. What with your scientific and magical research, your volunteer work, funding the library and museum…"

She turned away to hide her flushed face. "Thanks. But I'm sure it's nothing compared to the police work you do."

"Eh," Flash said, waving his hoof. "To be honest, we don't get that much action, what with the Power Ponies handling all the big stuff. Oh, not that I don't appreciate their help! But I'm sure their work is a lot more exciting than what we cops do. For instance," he suddenly became excited, "did you see that robot elephant fight on the news? That thing was swinging its trunk everywhere! Almost crushed that school bus! And when Zapp's storm cloud spun out of control and all

hope seemed lost, the Matter-Horn just swooped in and saved the day! She froze that cloud like *whoosh!* And did you see her in her first battle with the Great and Powerful Trixie? They got into this epic magic duel and…"

"Have you decided on what to order?" a server asked.

"Yes!" Twilight exclaimed a little too excitedly. "Yes, yes! Why don't we order our food and," the rest she mumbled under her breath, "talk about something else?"

It was very late when Sombra returned to his apartment. He unlocked and opened the front door to find his roommate asleep in front of the television, an afghan over her body. She was a crystal unicorn with a shimmering purple coat and blue mane. Smiling, Sombra used his magic to switch off the television and pull the afghan over her shoulder.

She must have felt the movement, for she grumbled, "Sombra?"

He sighed as he stroked the top of her head. "I didn't want to wake you, Radiant Hope."

The eyelids over her bright blue orbs slowly lifted. "What time is it?"

"Late," he said apologetically. "I'm sorry, but it was for a good reason." He leaned forward to whisper into her ear. "I did it."

Her eyes popped open. "You did it?"

He laughed. "I did it! I did it, Hope!"

She smiled brightly. "Oh, Sombra! That's wonderful!"

"I haven't officially tested it on ponies yet, but it worked on three lab mice!" He took her hoof. "This is it, Hope! Soon all our trouble will be over!"

"What did Miss Sparkle say?"

"I haven't told her yet!"

"You haven't?" She frowned. "Why? She's your boss, and the one funding your research."

"I haven't told her, because I wanted the pleasure of telling you first! And," he said, using his magic to take a test tube filled with dark purple liquid out of his coat pocket, "to have you be the first pony to test it."

Hope stared at the dark purple serum. "S-Sombra, I…I know you're trying to help me, but…" She lifted her hoof and slowly pushed the tube down. "Don't you think you should run more tests first? See if it's safe on ponies? I mean…we don't know what it'll do to me."

He frowned. "You're right." He stepped back to look at the tube. "You're right. How…how foolish of me. Ponies have a much larger mass than mice. You could be injured."

"It's alright, Sombra," Hope said, grunting as she tried leaning onto her foreleg. "I can wait a little longer."

"But of course," he murmured, mostly to himself. "What pony would willingly test themselves on a formula like this? It could turn their molecules into anti-matter. Would…would Miss Sparkle approve a test so dangerous?"

"Sombra?"

He turned to her with a smile. "Sorry, my friend. I was just thinking out loud." Tucking the serum away, he asked, "Would you like me to help you to bed?"

Sighing in satisfaction, she flopped her head onto the couch cushion. "I'm comfortable here, but thanks for the offer."

He readjusted her blanket and then planted a soft kiss on her forehead. "Sleep well, Hope. You'll get your life back soon, I promise." He glanced at the tube sticking out of his pocket. "No matter what it takes."

Rainbow's eyes were tired from watching the security footage of the gardens from last week. She had been staring at the computer screen for hours, watching ponies come and go. The only interesting thing she had seen was the night janitor taking selfies with all the statues and making silly faces.

She was about to drift off when a glimmer of light caught her eye. Squinting, she paused the video. Leaning closer to the screen, she focused on the statue of Discord. Using her mouse, she enlarged image and saw something peculiar on the statue's chest. It was a dark spot. Had a fly caught on the lens or something?

She pressed play and watched as the dark spot went away and then returned, shining like some tiny beacon. When the light went away, she paused the video and zoomed in further. She couldn't be certain, because the image was so pixelated now, but she could've sworn there was a tiny crack where the dark spot had been.

Rainbow picked up her cell and dialed. She tapped her hoof nervously on her desk as she listened to the tone.

" *Hello?* " a disgruntled voice answered.

"Daring?" Rainbow asked. "It's me, Dash!"

" *Dash?* " Daring Do said with a groan. " *Do you have any idea what time it is over here?* "

"Oh. Well, I never know where you are, so…"

" *And it's best you don't. Whatever you want, it better be important.* "

"Actually, I have a, uh, question about one of our museum exhibits."

" *Is it one of mine?* "

"Well, no, but…"

" *Then I'm not the pony you should be talking to…* "

"Wait, wait, wait! It may not be one of your exhibits, but we did do a lot of research on Ancient Grace and I just wanted to check with

you."

Daring sighed. " *What is it?* "

Rainbow glanced at the image onscreen. "What do you know about the statue of Discord?"

There was silence on the other end. " *The one you have in the sculpture gardens?* "

"Yeah, well…isn't there a legend that this statue might be…how you say, *possessed* by the God of Chaos?"

" *Not so much* possessed *as it* is *the God of Chaos.* "

"What do you mean by that?"

Daring groaned. " *Dash, don't you remember that amphora of the God of Chaos holding a pendant in his claw?* "

"Yeah. What about it?"

She grumbled. " *I really wish you would pay more attention when I'm telling you things. That pendant in the image is the Amulet of Chaos. Legend has it that it was given to Discord by someone powerful, but no pony knows who. Anyway, it granted him the power to have free reign over the mortal realm. Gods were not permitted to interfere with mortals directly, you see, at least outside of their affiliations.* "

"Meaning…?"

" *Poseidon could not control the sky, Zeus could not control the dead, Demeter could not make ponies fall in love. Get it? As such, Discord, while in control of chaos, was not allowed to corrupt the balance between chaos and order, but he was able to do that with the Amulet of Chaos.*

" *He was completely out of control, wreaking havoc on the mortal realm. It took the power of all twelve Olympians and their gifts to defeat him, sealing his essence in stone.* "

Rainbow gulped as she touched her pendant, which was hidden

beneath her shirt. "And…is there anything in those legends that says…what would happen if the statue…broke?"

" *There is a prophecy that Discord would one day be released by… well, the ancient Gracian text roughly translates to 'The Keeper of His Core.'* "

"What does that mean?"

" *No idea. Why do you ask?* "

Rainbow bit her lip. "I guess…it would just be good for Mr. Fetlock to know…should we be worried if the statue is…cracking?"

There was a long silence.

"Daring?"

" *How did the crack happen?* "

"I don't know. The security footage just shows this light or something and then this crack appears."

" *No pony was around when it happened?* "

"Nope. Unless you count the janitor and night guard, but not even they were in the exhibit at the time."

" *I wouldn't worry about it too much. The prophecy speaks of this Keeper being a mortal pony. But if you're really concerned, I would recommend moving the statue to a secure location, away from other ponies, just for a little while.* "

Rainbow cringed. "Mr. Fetlock's not gonna like that. That statue's like the centerpiece of the garden."

" *Tell him I suggested this. And hey, it might just be a regular statue and not the God of Chaos at all. You never know.* "

"Thanks for the advice." Rainbow shifted in her seat. "Hey, Daring? Can I ask you a personal question?"

There was a pause. " *Make it quick. I have somewhere to be in the morning.* "

Rainbow sighed. "Do you think I'm…reckless?"

Daring said nothing for a moment and then chuckled. " *Dash, you worked for* me *for years. Of* course *you're reckless. Comes with the job description of being a hero.* "

"No, I mean do you think I'm…impulsive to the point that I could jeopardize an entire mission?"

" *Okay, I know you're not smart enough to put all those words in one sentence. Are those new partners of yours giving you a hard time?* "

"One of them more than others." She groaned. "I kind of screwed up while battling this giant robot elephant today. Let's just say my Zeus storm got out of hoof."

Daring laughed.

"Glad you find it funny," Rainbow said sarcastically.

" *No, no, Dash. Look, every pony makes mistakes, and sometimes, when we're in the heat of battle, we do things without thinking. Sometimes, being impulsive, reckless, pays off when you need to act quickly. Yes, sometimes we make the wrong choices in the process, but that's what makes us ponies. Heck, I've made a lot of mistakes in my time.* "

"You?" Rainbow scoffed. "Like what?"

" *I made you think you couldn't be a hero.* "

Rainbow was quiet.

" *Don't try to argue, you know it's true. Listen, Dash, it is important to trust your instincts, but sometimes, if you* have *the time, you need to take a moment to think. Just don't take too long, otherwise you might end up getting pounded into the ground.* "

That made Rainbow chuckle a bit. "Thanks. It's good to know at

least *one* of my mentors believes in me."

" *Yeah, yeah. Now feel good about yourself and let me sleep.* "

Meanwhile, at the rock farm, Maud Pie was awoken from her slumber when her bedroom door creaked. Her sister Pinkie peered into the room.

"Pinkie," Maud said in her monotonous voice. "It's the middle of the night."

"I couldn't sleep," Pinkie said, hanging her head. "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Maud nodded and scooted over in her bed so that Pinkie could have room. Pinkie closed the door, climbed into the bed and snuggled next to her sister.

"Something's wrong," Maud said, not really asking a question.

Pinkie sighed. "What am I for, Maud? I mean…am all I good for is farming rocks all my life? Don't get me wrong. I love you and Marble and Limestone and Ma and Pa, but…"

"You don't think farming rocks is the life for you." She looked at Pinkie with her expressionless eyes. "I know. I see how miserable you are whenever we're out in the quarry. You're always staring off at someplace else, because you'd rather be someplace else."

Pinkie smiled softly. "You know me so well."

"Weller than you think." She tapped Pinkie's glasses. "Don't think I don't know why you suddenly started wearing glasses when you clearly don't need them. Those lenses aren't even real. And you definitely don't need to wear them to bed."

Pinkie bit her lip and glanced around nervously. "W-What are you talking about? What glasses? What lenses?!"

"Pinkie. We may not have a TV, but we still have a radio, and get

the paper. I've seen your picture. I know you're that Power Pony, Fili-Second. You started wearing glasses so ponies wouldn't recognize you. That's also why you were always making excuses to get out of the quarry."

Pinkie's mouth was wide open. Maud, still not showing emotion, gently closed her sister's jaw with her hoof.

"I don't blame you for wanting to leave," Maud said. "Why do you think I want to get my Rocktorate? As passionate as I am about rocks, I have your desire to seek happiness elsewhere. Besides, I'm proud of what you're doing with your new super speed. Helping ponies is a noble cause. And no matter where we are," she said, laying a hoof on Pinkie's shoulder, "we'll always be sisters."

Pinkie was on the verge of crying as she hugged her back. "Thank you, Maud!"

It was good to know that at least her best sister friend forever believed that she was a hero.

The next day, Sombra was in his laboratory, staring at a tube of his serum. He turned to his camera and switched it on.

"Test Number Eighty-Seven," he said. "After the last few successful tests with the mice, I've decided it's time to see if this serum will have the same effect on ponies." He got his syringe and poked it into the test tube. "Unfortunately, it is highly unlikely that ponies would…volunteer for such a…potentially dangerous experiment."

He stared at the syringe, which was now filled with the serum. "And so, I have no choice but to test it on…myself."

He rolled up his sleeve and, using his magic, brought the needle close to his foreleg.

"This is for you, Hope," he murmured.

Half an hour later, Twilight and Spike entered Sombra's laboratory.

"Dr. Sargon?" Twilight said. "You said you wanted to meet with us about something im—"

She trailed off when she realized the laboratory was empty.

"Dr. Sargon?" she called again. "Dr. Sargon? Sombra?" She turned to the secretary at her desk. "I thought you said he was in?"

"He *was* ," the secretary said, rising to her hooves. "He went in there about an hour ago. I haven't seen him come out, and I haven't left my desk except for a few minutes in the bathroom. Maybe he slipped out then."

"Twilight, look!" Spike said, pointing to the camera with the red light. "The camera's still on!"

Twilight switched the camera off and then accessed the most recent recording. Spike heard muffled sounds as she watched. Her eyes widened as a horrifying shriek was heard.

"Call the police," she said to the secretary. "Tell them there's been an accident."

As the secretary went for the phone, Spike asked, "What happened?"

She showed him the camera. "You need to see this."

On the tiny screen, Spike saw Sombra holding a syringe up to his face.

" *And so,* " Sombra said in the recording, " *I have no choice but to test it on…myself.* "

Spike and Twilight watched as Sombra injected the serum into his foreleg. A few seconds later, he collapsed to the floor, twitching and heaving as he struggled to breathe. His body twisted and convulsed. Twilight covered Spike's eyes as Sombra let out a horrifying cry. There was a flash of light and when it diminished, Sombra had vanished.

Radiant Hope is from the IDW comics. She played a big role in Sombra's origin story. "Sargon" is from the Akkadian name *Sharru-kinu* meaning "true king." I thought it sounded cool for a surname for Sombra. I sort of based this version of Sombra off the Mad Hatter and Manbat in the Batman animated series, not so much the villain side but the civilian side.

The Shadow King: Part 2

" *People in blind love throw away common sense, conscience and comedy from the life."*

- Amit Kalantri

"We really gotta stop meeting like this," Flash told Twilight. "You seem to attract a lot of trouble."

She sighed. "Occupational hazard."

The police were inspecting Sombra's lab for confirmation that his accident had been fatal. So far, they had found no traces of remains and it could only be assumed from the video that Sombra was deceased. Chief Spitfire passed this information on to Twilight, who hung her head in disappointment.

"I was really hoping he had simply teleported someplace else," Twilight said.

"We've searched the whole building," the chief said. "No sign of him. We can only assume the worst."

"Dr. Sargon was such a brilliant scientist. I knew what he was studying was risky, but its purpose was supposed to be beneficial to society. But I never imagined he would…experiment on himself." She sighed. "I wish he had talked to me, weighed his options. He might not have…"

She sniffed a little, compelling Flash to put his hoof around her.

"It's okay, Twi," he said.

Chief Spitfire cleared her throat. Flash glanced sideways to see her narrowed, disapproving gaze.

"Err, Miss Sparkle," he said, removing his hoof.

The chief turned back to Twilight. "Did he have any family?"

"A roommate," Twilight replied. "He put her as his emergency contact for everything." She hung her head. "Oh, she's going to be devastated when she hears about this. I better go tell her myself. This isn't something you can say over the phone."

"I'll come with you," Flash said, outstretching his wing.

Spitfire pushed herself between them. " *I'll* come with you. Miss Sparkle, can you give me a minute with Officer Sentry?"

Twilight nodded and left the laboratory. Chief Spitfire pulled her officer close so that he could look directly into her eyes.

"Protocol doesn't forbid you from having a marefriend," she said sternly, "but if it's going to distract you from your duty, perhaps you shouldn't be put on any more cases involving Miss Sparkle."

Flash gulped. "Understood, Chief. It won't happen again."

"See that it does," she said, letting him go. "But for now, I don't want you alone with her while you're on duty. And don't think I don't know about how you two met in the first place." Her eyes narrowed further. "No more flirting with witnesses, especially while taking statements. Okay?"

Flash nodded, looking as if he were afraid his boss would burn his hooves off.

"Good." She trotted out of the lab to follow Twilight, grumbling, "Stallions."

Chief Spitfire knocked on the door to Sombra's apartment. It was opened a little by magic and Radiant Hope's head poked out.

"Can I help you, officer?" she asked.

"Chief Spitfire," the chief said, pointing to herself and then Twilight. "This is…"

"Twilight Sparkle. I know. You're Sombra's boss."

"You're Dr. Radiant Hope, Dr. Sombra Sargon's roommate?"

"Yes," Hope said.

"May we come in? I'm…afraid we have some bad news."

Wearing an expression of worry, Hope opened the door further. "Of course. Come in."

With the door fully open, the chief and Twilight saw that Hope was in a wheelchair, for the very good reason that three quarters of her back legs were absent from her body. They tried not to stare for too long as they passed her. Hope used her magic to make the wheels of her chair roll forward.

"What's happened?" Hope asked, her voice choking. "Is it Sombra? You wouldn't be here unless…" As her eyes watered up, she looked between the two visitors. "Is he…?"

Spitfire glanced at Twilight, silently asking if she wanted to be the one to tell. Twilight gave her answer by hanging her head.

"There was an," the chief said, turning back to Hope, "accident in your roommate's lab. We're afraid the results were…fatal."

Hope gasped, putting her hooves to her mouth. "No. No!" She broke into tears as she buried her face in her hooves. "Sombra…oh my Sombra…"

Feeling sympathetic for the crystal mare, Twilight knelt down to her. "Were you close?"

Hope nodded. "We grew up together…in the orphanage. He was my best friend. I…I never got the chance to…" Lowering her hooves, she looked at Twilight. "How…how did it happen?"

Twilight bit her lip in hesitation. "Did…he ever tell you about his… experiment with shadow magic?"

"But of course. He's been working on that formula ever since…" She

glanced down at her stubby legs.

"He had told me about your accident."

"What accident?" Chief Spitfire asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"It was a bus crash," Hope said. "A few years ago. My legs were so badly damaged, they had to be amputated." She glanced down at her cutie mark, which showed the pharmacy symbol of two snakes entwining a winged staff. "I'd always been able to heal other ponies' injuries, but not even my magic could bring my legs back. When I lost my job, Sombra became determined to…"

"Lost your job?" Twilight asked.

Hope sighed. "Despite the fact that my healing magic hadn't been affected by the crash, the ponies at the hospital thought I should… take more time for recovery." She looked at them both. "Except they never called me back."

"That's…that's absurd!"

"I agree," Chief Spitfire said, taking out her notepad. "You should tell me the name of this hospital. You could have the grounds to sue them for discrimination."

"It doesn't matter," Hope said. "They wouldn't take me anywhere else. Apparently, once you've lost half your appendages, you've lost your ability to do anything."

"That's why Sombra was working on the serum," Twilight said.

"Yes, in hopes that I'd be able to move again without my chair, even grow my legs back. But what happened to him? Was there an explosion?"

"Something like that," Twilight said, closing her eyes. "He…didn't think he'd be able to find a pony test subject…willing enough, so… he tried testing it on himself." She opened her eyes. "It didn't work."

Hope started crying again. "Oh, Sombra! Had…had I known he was going to die for me, I…I would've stopped him long ago!"

Twilight lay a hoof on her shoulder. "Don't blame yourself for this. Sombra made his choice, only because he…he loved you."

Shaking her head, Hope said, "No. He didn't. Not in that way."

"The guy injected himself with a lethal serum so that you could have your legs back," the chief said. "Few ponies do that for some pony who's just a friend."

That made Hope cry harder.

"Dr. Hope," Twilight said, "if there's anything I can do…"

"Please," Hope murmured. "I'd just…like to be alone right now."

Twilight and Spitfire complied as they exited the apartment.

"We're sorry for your loss," the chief said as she closed the door. Sighing, she turned to Twilight. "To think they wouldn't let her back just because she couldn't walk or stand anymore, despite the rest of her body being perfectly capable! I mean she has magic for crying out loud! Honestly, the stuff that still goes on in this day and age!"

"Dr. Sargon had told me about the accident," Twilight said. "Had I known it was this serious, I might have done something, maybe found a suitable lawyer for them, seen if I could find her a job…"

"You couldn't've known, Miss Sparkle. One thing I've learned in my years as an officer of the law is that no matter how hard you try to make a difference in this world, there are just some things out of your control."

Suddenly, Twilight's cell started buzzing and beeping in her pantsuit pocket.

"Something's wrong," she said as she took out her phone and looked at the red screen. "There's been a security breach back at the lab."

"With my officers still there?" Spitfire asked, raising an eyebrow.

Twilight quickly dialed a number. "Spike? What's going on?"

At the same time, the chief got a call.

"Sentry, what's going on?" Spitfire said into her cell.

Two conversations happened at once, both urging Twilight and the chief to return to Sparkle Labs.

Back at the labs, all the researchers were crowding around their boss, talking at once.

"Something spilled my hydrochloric acid!"

"Something tipped over my microscope!"

"Something broke all my test tubes!"

"Something nibbled on my sandwich!"

Chief Spitfire finally intervened and moved in front of Twilight. "Back off, every pony, and stay calm. From what I've heard, it sounds like the work of vermin. Maybe some pony's lab mice got out. You're looking for an exterminator, not the police."

"I *did* see a mouse," said one scientist. "At least I saw its shadow."

"I saw a shadow too," said another. "But it was too big to be a mouse's! It had eyes!"

"Calm down," Twilight said to her coworkers. "Chief Spitfire is right, it's probably just a pest problem. I'll have animal control check out the labs. For now, why don't all of you take the rest of the day off until we resolve this?"

There was a murmur as the scientists huddled towards the exit.

"Good idea," Spitfire said to Twilight. "It looks like our work here is done. My officers haven't found anything to suggest foul play in Dr. Sargon's incident." She leaned in to whisper. "Though if this pest problem turns out to be anything otherwise, you know where to find us."

"Thank you," Twilight said.

The chief tipped her hat before departing. Spike pulled on the sleeve of Twilight's pantsuit.

"Isn't it a little weird that after Dr. Sargon's accident," he whispered, "weird things start happening in the labs?"

"Some of Dr. Sargon's mice *are* missing from their cage," Twilight said, "and the video said his tests had worked on the mice, and that researcher had mentioned seeing a mouse's shadow." She rubbed her chin. "Maybe Dr. Sargon's experiment really *did* work, at least on the mice, and they're running around in a shadowy state. If I'm right, they really can't do much harm like this. Still, we should contain them. Even if Dr. Sargon's gone, those mice might be helpful in continuing his research."

Spike shivered. "Just the thought of shadowy mice scurrying around gives me the creeps."

Twilight smiled. "Be thankful it's just mice."

That evening, Radiant Hope was in her bedroom, looking through an old photo album. The page was open to photos of herself and Sombra at the Crystal Heart Foal Center. One photo showed the two of them on the playground jungle gym. Sombra was pretending to be the prince trapped in a tower and Hope was the knight coming to rescue him. Another picture showed them as astronauts with cardboard boxes on their heads to represent helmets.

She turned the page. One side showed Sombra in a graduation cap and gown, holding up a PhD in Shadow Magic, Hope with her hooves around his neck. The other side had Hope in graduation attire, holding up her MD, Sombra at her side. He was looking down at her, his bright green eyes and warm smile showing pride. Hope sniffed as a tear dropped onto Sombra's photographic face.

" *Hope* ."

She stiffened in her chair and looked around the room. It was nearly

dark, save for the lone lamp lit on the side table.

" *Hope* ."

Igniting her horn, she called, "Who's there?"

" *Hope, don't you recognize my voice?* "

She shook her head. There was a sigh. The voice was low and echoed in a way that it seemed to come from all around.

" *Have I really changed so much?* "

"I-I'm warning you!" Hope exclaimed with a gulp. "I may be handicapped but I still have magic! You're trespassing! I'll call the police if you don't leave now!"

" *I'm not trespassing. I live here.* "

She froze. "What?"

" *It's me, Hope. We grew up together at the Crystal Heart Foal Center. Ms. Chestnut Falls was our caretaker.* "

Radiant Hope did not know how to respond.

" *Whenever we played castle, I would be the prince trapped in the tower, and you, Sir Lady Hope, would rescue me.* "

Sir Lady Hope. There was only one pony who could possibly know about that.

"S-Sombra?" Hope stammered.

There was a sigh of satisfaction and a hissy, " *Yesssssss* ."

She shook her head. "I…I must be dreaming. It's my grief. It's making me hear things. You can't be here. You're dead."

" *I'm here, Hope. I'm not dead. Listen to me. My experiment, it worked. But…not in the way I'd expected.* "

"What are you talking about?"

" *I can't explain it. You have to douse your horn and turn the lamp off.* "

"Why?"

" *Just do it. Trust me.* "

Biting her lip unsurely, Hope doused her horn and switched off the lamp. She heard movement behind her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood as she felt a heavy, cold breath. She spun around and what she saw made her shriek.

A pair of glowing green eyes with blood red pupils was staring right at her. An eerie purple substance was smoking out of its corners. She could just make out the silhouette of a pony's head and, upon squinting; she noticed a sharp red horn sticking out above the eyes. A mouth opened and she saw glinting white fangs.

Hope rolled her chair back an inch in alarm. Then the eyes changed. She could've sworn she saw a flash of…sadness in them.

"Even you, Hope," the shadow said. "Even you recoil from me."

His voice had changed. It was so much deeper, but its solemn tone was unmistakable. Hope's heart sank in guilt.

"Is it…?" she said, rolling her chair closer. "Is it…really you?"

She slowly raised her hoof towards the shadowy face. The eyes shut for a moment as they awaited her touch. To both the figure's and the mare's disappointment, her hoof fell straight through him.

"Oh, Sombra," Hope said, putting her hoof to her mouth. "Forgive me, I just…I didn't…what's *happened* to you?"

"The serum," Sombra said, opening his eyes. "It worked. It made me like a shadow…more than I thought. I can do everything a shadow can. Watch."

He lunged towards her and Hope gasped as he passed through her.

"I can go through anything," he said.

The silhouette then morphed into something larger. Hope's eyes widened as the shadow of a bear suddenly towered over her.

"I can change into anything," he said as he returned to his pony shape. "Except…I can't turn back." His eyes lowered. "And I can't take shape in the light. I have to be in the shadows." The eyes looked back up at her. "I did this for you, Hope. I had to see if it worked on ponies."

She put her hoof over her heart. "Oh, Sombra…"

"But it gets worse, Hope." She didn't think it was possible, but his voice became even gloomier. "The serum…it's made my molecules unstable. Since they don't make up a solid structure anymore, they might…disperse. The mice, they…" His eyes shut. "If I don't find a cure soon, I might become less than a shadow. I…I might become…"

He choked on his words. Hope looked up at her horn.

"Sombra," she said, raising her hoof to where she thought his shoulder was. "My healing magic, it might be able to help you! I might not be able to make my legs grow back, but maybe…"

He sighed. "I doubt it can do *this* much."

"It wouldn't hurt to *try* ! Sombra, just let me try!"

His eyes stared at her and then slowly shut. "I don't suppose you can make it any worse."

Closing her eyes, Hope concentrated on her magic. She thought about how much Sombra meant to her and how much she wanted to help him. Her horn ignited with blue light, which made Sombra cover his eyes with a hiss.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't do this without the light from my horn. If I do this right, it'll only be for a second."

The light became brighter, and as Hope let out a grunt, the room was flooded with blue. Sombra screamed in agony. Thinking that she had made things worse, Hope quickly doused her horn and

opened her eyes.

But it wasn't dark yet. Before her was a glowing ball of blue light, the form of a pony writhing within it.

"Sombra?" she called.

The shape inside the ball wailed, causing Hope to jolt back in alarm. The sudden movement tipped her chair backward, and she yelped as she fell to the floor. When she looked up, the light had diminished.

In the dim light, Radiant Hope could see that Sombra wasn't as shadowy as before. His pony shape was more distinctive, but his eyes, horn, and teeth still glowed eerily. He looked down at Hope with those sinister eyes. She couldn't help but flinch as he reached a hoof towards her. To both their surprise, the hoof did not fall through her. It was solid, but it was not the same soft, warm hoof that would gently touch her as a child. It was cold like ice, and sent a shiver through her.

However, his touch was still tender as he slowly snaked his other hoof beneath her so that he could pick her up. His horn then ignited and magic enveloped her wheelchair to raise it back up. His aura wasn't blue anymore, but dark, with purple and green bubbling around it. Hope stared at the magic in confusion, with some fear, as she was gently lowered into the chair.

She was able to get a better look at him now with the slight glow of his horn. His body appeared to have been returned to normal, save for the eyes, the horn, and his pointed teeth. On top of all that, his dark mane, while it had always been a bit wild, seemed to be literally flowing, as if it was moving with the darkness.

"It worked, Hope," he said, looking at his now solid hooves. "I can…I can touch things again." His smile wavered a moment. "But wait… can I still…?" His body morphed into the shape of a snake. He laughed as he returned to his solid state. "Yesssss. This is perfect! I can change from solid to shadow at will now!"

"Yes," Hope said, putting her hoof to her head. "But that spell…it

took a lot out of me, Sombra. I've…I've never done anything so…" She closed her eyes as she started to develop a migraine. "A spell like that, I don't know how long it'll even last."

As she said this, one of Sombra's front hooves seemed to fade away.

"Oh, that's alright," he said with a shrug. "You can just keep doing the spell when…"

He trailed off when he saw how tired Hope looked. He couldn't keep draining her like this.

"No," Sombra said, tapping his chin with the hoof that was still solid. "There must be some other way…oh, if I only had my lab!"

"They…cleaned it out earlier today," Hope said, pointing to a cardboard box on the dresser. "They gave me some of your personal items, but any chemicals and equipment, they kept. Said it was property of Sparkle Labs."

Sombra growled in anger. "How dare they?! What gives them the right to take my research from me?!"

"They thought you were dead." Tears came to Hope's eyes. " *I* thought you were dead!"

"Well, I'm not! And if I'm ever to save myself from this state, if I'm ever to help…" He trailed off as he locked gaze with her. "You must get them back!"

"I asked for your notes! I…I wanted to keep something of yours, but like I said, it's property of Sparkle Labs!"

Snarling through his sharp teeth, Sombra glanced sideways out the window. Maretropolis was dark, save for the city lights. Plenty of shadows for him to hide in. He then looked down at his semi-solid form with a sinister smile.

"Well," he said, chuckling throatily, "there are… *other* ways for us to retrieve what's ours."

Hope's eyes widened in horror. "Sombra, you can't mean…"

"It's *my* research!" he shouted, thrusting himself towards her. "If they won't hand it back to me like any decent pony, I'll just have to take it back by force! And," he said, gesturing to himself, "with my new form, no pony will even know it was me. Besides, as far as any pony else knows, I'm dead. And you," he cupped her chin, "have to make sure it stays that way."

She gulped. "S-Sombra, please, there has to be some other way we can…"

"There *is* no other way! Please, Hope, I *need* you! You're going to have to help me put the antidote together! Every second we spend talking about this, my molecules become even more unstable! Do you want me to fade away into nothing?!" When he saw how frightened he was making her, he took a deep, calming breath. "I don't want to have to resort to…unrighteous means, but I have no other choice. But I promise you," he put his hoof over hers, "once this is fixed, I will never do anything like this again."

Hope looked at his other hoof, the one that was transparent, and cautiously raised hers towards it. She put it through his hoof, feeling nothing but cold air, imagining that they were truly touching.

"Alright, Sombra," she said in determination. "Whatever you need, I'll help you." She glanced down at her stubby legs. "Just like you tried to help me."

Even though night had fallen, the exterminator was still investigating Sparkle Labs for vermin, as it was a very large facility. She wore a radiation suit in case of any chemical spills, as did Twilight and Spike, who followed her closely.

"Well," the exterminator said, squinting at a sparking wire that had been chewed through. "There are definitely signs of mice activity." She faced Twilight and Spike. "Now, how exactly do you want these pests taken care of?"

"We'd prefer it if the mice weren't harmed," Twilight said quickly. "While we do use mice for occasional experimentation, we try our best to keep everything humane, if you know what I mean."

"Of course," the exterminator said with a nod. "Well, I can set a few traps around." She held up her hoof before Twilight could protest. "Nothing harmful, just a few cages with bait. I'd recommend keeping this place under temporary quarantine for now. With all these toxic chemicals you've got scattered about, who knows what the little rodents will get into?"

"You have no idea," Twilight murmured. "Hopefully we'll have caught all the mice before…"

They all jumped when a sudden crash was heard.

"What was that?" Spike asked, hiding behind Twilight's leg. "The mice?"

"Has to be," Twilight said. "I'd sent every pony else home. We should be the only ones here."

She froze as a low, angry growl was heard. It certainly wasn't that of a mouse.

"You sure?" the exterminator asked shakily.

Then came a metallic clang.

"That came from Dr. Sargon's laboratory," Twilight said, heading for the door. "Come on."

They all raced out of the lab they were in and to the door with police tape over the front. Twilight used her magic to pull the door open, ripping the police tape. The lights were out, but there was something glowing in the corner of the room. Twilight ignited her horn, filling the room with pink light. She and Spike let out a shriek and the exterminator fainted.

For a brief moment, they saw the dark silhouette of a pony, its bright green eyes shutting immediately and its hoof rising to shield them from the light. Something about the figure was misshapen. Its mane

seemed to flow in all directions, and the bottom half of its body didn't resemble a pony's at all, but was merely a puff of smoke.

On the floor was broken glass, and a rack of test tubes filled with liquid appeared to be floating within the figure's body.

"Who are you?!" Twilight demanded.

" *What* are you?" Spike asked, gripping onto Twilight's leg.

The figure roared as it morphed into a cloud of darkness. Twilight's jaw dropped as the thing slinked over to a nearby microscope and seemed to *merge* with the object's shadow.

"What the…?" she said.

She was so amazed, the light of her horn started to waver, allowing the strange shadow to move out of the microscope's shadow, slink along the wall, and then, like a dark mist, disappeared through the bars of an air duct.

"W-What was that?" Spike asked, shivering.

"I don't know," Twilight said, looking at the broken glass on the floor. "But that *certainly* wasn't a mouse."

Twilight sent the exterminator home, as it was clear this was more than a mere rodent problem. Now she and Spike were in the surveillance room, watching the camera footage of the recent robbery.

"It's amazing," Twilight said in awe. "He simply picked up the test tubes, became a sort of anti-matter, became one with a shadow, and then went through the vent as if he were nothing but smoke!"

"He was like a shadow," Spike said, still rattled about the incident, "with no pony casting it!"

"Shadow…" She gasped. "Spike, do we still have the camera showing Dr. Sargon's last moments?"

"Err, yeah," Spike said, picking up a video camera on a desk. "We'd put it here so we could compare it with the surveillance footage, remember?"

"Play that last bit of film again. Maybe there's something we missed."

Spike opened the camera and clicked on the most recent entry onscreen. It was the same as before: Dr. Sargon injecting himself with the serum, him crying out in agony, and then disappearing in a flash of light.

"It's pretty straightforward," Spike said.

"But we didn't watch this all the way through," Twilight said. "Remember? The camera was still recording when we arrived."

"Okay, but I don't think we're gonna…wait!" He paused the footage. "What is *that* ?!"

Twilight squinted. "I don't see anything."

"Hang on a second."

Spike pulled open the desk drawer and took out a cable. He connected one end to the camera and the other to one of the monitors. The image from the camera had now been enlarged on the larger screen.

"There!" Spike said, pointing at a filing cabinet in the corner. "Right there! Look at that filing cabinet!"

Twilight leaned towards the screen. "What about it?"

He indicated either side of the cabinet. "It has *two* shadows!"

Upon looking closer, Twilight let out a gasp. "You're right, Spike! Can you put this in slow motion?"

Nodding, Spike typed a few commands on the keyboard and the video played again slowly. After a few seconds, there was some movement onscreen. One of the cabinet's shadows appeared to be

stretching up along the wall, towards the same ventilation shaft the thief from earlier had vanished into.

Then there was a flash of color.

"Pause!" Twilight shouted.

Spike paused the video.

"Now make it bigger!"

He zoomed in on the stretching shadow. While the image was slightly pixilated, they could just make out two tiny green specks that resembled a pair of eyes.

"Spike," Twilight said, turning to him solemnly, "I'm not so sure Dr. Sargon is dead."

"This was all I could get for now," Sombra said as he dropped the test tubes on the bed before Radiant Hope. "But we don't need my notes now that we have the serum. From this we can create an antidote." He looked at Hope. "I can barely carry these test tubes within my being. I'll need you to put the antidote together."

"I said I'd help, Sombra," Hope said, "but my expertise is on healing magic, not shadow magic. I won't know what to mix together."

"I'll tell you what to do." He winced as his front hooves started to fade further. "Hope?"

"Of course."

She ignited her horn and attempted the healing spell again. By the time the magical sphere had come and gone, Hope was exhausted.

"Before…" she said, panting, "we do…anything else…" She slumped forward in her chair. "I need rest."

Sombra quickly caught her before she could fall out of her chair. It was like being held by a cold wind.

They both turned in alarm as a knock came at the front door.

"Should I answer it?" Hope whispered.

"Silence," Sombra said, placing his hoof over her lips. "Maybe they'll just leave."

They waited, and the knock came a second time.

"What if it's the police?" Hope asked. "What if they've come to ask about you breaking into the lab? They'll be suspicious if I don't answer."

He realized she was right. "Then answer it, but tell them nothing."

"Of course," Hope said as she used her magic to open the bedroom door. "But stay in here. I'm going to turn a light on."

She shut the door and then switched on the living room lamp. The knock came again.

"I'm coming!" Hope shouted, wheeling herself to the front door.

She magically unlocked and opened it. Twilight Sparkle stood there alone, a serious expression on her face.

"Miss Sparkle," Hope said, trying to hide her nervousness. "W-What brings you here so late?"

"Dr. Hope," Twilight said, noticing how tired she looked, "sorry to wake you. May I come in please?"

Biting her lip, Hope glanced at the door to the bedroom where Sombra was hidden. If she didn't let her in, Hope might make herself look suspicious.

"O-Of course," she said, wheeling backward to allow Twilight in.

Twilight glanced around as the door was closed behind her. She appeared to be searching for something.

"Have you received any…unexpected visitors?" Twilight asked.

"Threats, maybe? Strange packages?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Hope asked, cocking her head.

Twilight turned to face her. "There's been a break-in at Sparkle Labs. Some pony went and took test tubes containing the formula that had…killed Dr. Sargon."

Hope forcefully widened her eyes to appear surprised. "Oh dear. Why would any pony want that awful formula?"

"That's the thing. We think Dr. Sargon's serum was…successful."

"Successful?" Her eyes flitted towards the bedroom. "H-How could it have been successful? It killed Sombra!"

"There have been…disturbances throughout Sparkle Labs. We went through all the security footage and found strange…figures shaped like mice."

Hope blinked. "Mice?"

"I'm sure Dr. Sargon must've mentioned that he'd tested the serum on some lab mice."

She gulped. "He, um, may have mentioned it."

"Yes, well," Twilight said, shifting uncomfortably, "it seems the serum had turned the mice into…shadows, and the security footage suggest that…well…" She looked at the crystal pony seriously. "I don't know how to tell you this, Doctor, but there's a chance that Dr. Sargon is…alive."

Hope gulped. "H-How can that be?"

"A pony-like shadow was spotted swiping the test tubes. We think… the serum might have turned Sombra into pure shadow, just as he had intended."

Glancing back at the bedroom, Hope said, "You d-d-don't say."

"But it might be worse than we thought."

"W-Worse?"

"The mice that were turned into shadows? Their molecules must have been unstable, because according to the security footage, a few hours after being injected with the serum, they sort of…" Twilight bit her lip. "Evaporated."

"Evaporated?" Hope said, her throat closing.

"Yes," Twilight said as she began pacing back and forth, "and, if I am correct, the same will happen to Sombra. However, since his mass is significantly larger than that of a mouse, he might last longer, but not forever. If we don't find him soon, he might evaporate into…"

She trailed off when she saw the stoic expression on Hope's face. Twilight squinted suspiciously at her.

"Why does none of this information seem to surprise you?"

Sweat began trickling from Hope's brow. "I-I'm j-j-just…in shock! Yes! I mean…earlier you told me Sombra was dead and…now you're saying he's alive?"

"Maybe," Twilight said, still suspicious. "If he hasn't evaporated yet."

"A-And," Hope said, moving her chair forward an inch, "if he is alive, h-how exactly would you cure him?"

"I'm not sure. Until we find a cure, we should be able to contain him in one of our magical containment units."

Hope stiffened. "Y-You mean…a *cell* ?"

Twilight shook her head. "I wouldn't call it…"

Her wheelchair started moving rapidly towards Twilight. "You would lock him up like some animal?!"

"No!" Twilight said, backing away. "It would be just to neutralize him until we find a…"

"You think he's some monster, don't you?! Well let me tell you something, Sparkle!" She pointed her hoof into the business mare's chest. "Sombra may look frightful, but he's no monster! He's still the stallion I know and love!"

Twilight blinked several times as she stared down at her. "How do you even know what he looks like?"

Hope froze. "I-I…I just assumed that…from what you said that he was…"

Her quick glance at the bedroom did not escape Twilight's notice.

"Dr. Hope," Twilight said slowly, "is Dr. Sargon here in this apartment?"

Hope backed her chair away. "N-No! I mean…why would you think?"

"Of course," Twilight said, advancing upon her. "Dr. Sargon's molecules are unstable. He can barely hold anything in his hooves, am I right? He needs some pony to mix together the formula, and who can he trust better than his best friend since foalhood?"

Hope shivered under Twilight's gaze. Then she caught sight of the lit lamp and had an idea. Using her magic, she turned the light off, allowing Sombra to enter through the slit of the bedroom door. Twilight spun around as Sombra's deep laugh echoed throughout the room.

"Very clever, Miss Sparkle," he said.

"I didn't tell her anything!" Hope insisted. "She figured it out!"

"I know, Hope." A pair of glowing green and red eyes appeared behind the mare in the chair. "You did nothing wrong."

"Dr. Sargon," Twilight said steadily. "I can help you. I can take you back to the lab and…"

"And put me in a cage!" Sombra shouted, his toothy mouth opening wide. "Like some freak show!"

"No, Sombra! We only want to help you, make you normal again!"

She jumped as the shadowy face appeared before hers.

"And who says I want to be normal again?" Sombra said with a hiss.

Hope blinked in confusion. "Sombra?"

"Do you have any idea how…how liberating it is? To be free to go wherever I please? I wouldn't give up this form for the world!"

Hope couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But…you said…"

He turned to her. "I still need a cure to stabilize my molecules, so that I can be in this state all the time without having to worry about disappearing! That's the real reason I brought the serum here!"

"Dr. Sargon, stop!" Twilight exclaimed. "This is insane!"

"Dr. Sargon?" Sombra said with a chuckle. "How droll a name for a being like me. I'm more than just a shadow. I'm the King of Shadows! And you, Hope," he said, cupping his friend's chin, "can be my queen."

Hope's lips quivered. "W-What?"

"Once the serum is perfected, not only will you be able to walk again, but we can do anything! We can live and move freely in the shadows! We'll be above all beings!"

"S-Sombra, I…" She gulped. "I didn't sign up for…"

"Leave her out of this, Sombra!" Twilight shouted. "Can't you see she doesn't want this?"

"Don't tell her what she wants!" Sombra bellowed, turning on her again. "Only I know what's best for her!" He studied her a moment. "Still, while Hope is talented, she does not have the chemical expertise necessary to complete the serum." He floated closer to Twilight. "You, on the other hoof…"

Twilight stepped back, unafraid. "You can't do anything to me!

You're just a shadow! You can barely hold anything in your hooves!"

His sharp teeth glinted as he smiled. "Ah, but you see, Miss Sparkle, while I'm not completely solid, I still have a few…tricks."

In one swift motion, he whooshed over to Hope. She let out a shriek as she was suddenly encased in complete darkness. When Sombra moved away, Hope was no longer in front of Twilight. She gasped in fright. Sombra rose up above the unicorn, grinning down at her.

"Your turn," he said lowly.

Before she could be enveloped in his darkness, Twilight pressed on her commlink and shouted, "Power Ponies, help!"

I've had to take care of a lot this month, and I really wish I'd gotten this saga done by now. I said it wouldn't be as long as the others, but that didn't necessarily mean it would be in two parts.

The Shadow King: Part 3

" *Think before you act and act on what you believe."*

- Bo Bennett

Fluttershy was standing before a mirror, her reflection staring back at her. There was nothing else to look at, for everything around her was darkness. Suddenly, the eyes of her reflection narrowed.

"You really think calling yourself a hero is going to change anything?" the mirror Fluttershy asked.

The actual Fluttershy gulped. "I…I could…"

"You can't run away from who you are." The reflection's eyes turned red. "Who you *truly* are."

The reflection grew, until it became the monster. Its roar echoed throughout the void.

"No!" Fluttershy cried, turning around and breaking into a run.

She had no idea where she was going. She couldn't see. But she could hear the loud footsteps of the monster behind her. Fluttershy's own eyes shut as tears welled up within them.

Then she collided into something. Something soft. Before Fluttershy had the chance to open her eyes, she was pulled into a tight but tender embrace.

" *It's alright* ," whispered a male's voice. " *I've got you.* "

The voice was low and sounded elderly, but its tone was caring. Caring enough that Fluttershy trusted it, so she clung to the stallion's fur and allowed herself to cry into it.

" *Shhh,* " the voice said. " *Don't cry, my darling.* " Fluttershy flinched

but did not move as she felt something comb through her mane. " *I'm here. I'll protect you.* "

She had no idea who was holding her, but she believed him. His fur was not only soft, but warm and comforting, and she could hear a rapid heartbeat beneath it. His hoof was tender as it stroked her, soothing her into a feeling of safety.

Then he spoke into her ear. " *I'll be out soon, my darling.* " The hoof moved down to her back, and Fluttershy shivered at how cold it was. " *Then we can be together at last.* "

Fluttershy's eyes opened when she realized something. The hoof running down her back didn't feel like a hoof at all. It had…fingers.

Suddenly everything felt cold and Fluttershy looked at the furry body she'd been embracing. Only it wasn't furry, it was a pillar of stone. Looking up, she could not see the head of the statue, but saw a light pulse within its chest.

" *You will be greatly rewarded* ," the voice said.

Fluttershy gasped as a stone claw that resembled that of an eagle's moved beside her.

" *If you set me free.* "

She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Then, out of the darkness came a new voice.

" *Power Ponies, help!* "

The dream was shattered as Fluttershy sat up in bed, startling Angel Bunny, who had been curled up at her hooves. Her ear was crackling loudly.

" *Twilight?* " said Spike's voice. " *Twilight, what's going on? Twilight!* "

" *Spike, what's happenin'?* " asked Mistress Mare-velous, who was on her nightly patrol.

Fluttershy could hear Rainbow groaning sleepily. " *Remind me to remove this thing from my ear before bed.* "

" *Twilight! Twilight!* " Spike continued calling.

" *Was that Twilight calling for help?* " asked Rarity, who was also coming out of sleep.

" *Girls, something's wrong!* " Spike exclaimed. " *Twilight's commlink is offline! I can't get ahold of her!* "

"Oh goodness!" Fluttershy said. "Is she in trouble?"

" *Has she been kidnapped by the Moscowvian mob?!* " Pinkie asked. " *Did they catch her snooping around their warehouse where they keep illegally smuggled nesting dolls?!* "

There were several sighs.

" *This might be worse than any mob!* " Spike said. " *We're gonna have to meet up at headquarters!* "

Fluttershy heard a yawn which she quickly concluded was from Rainbow. " *Five more minutes?* "

" *ZAPP!* " Mare-velous hollered.

" *Okay, okay, I'm coming!* "

" *Don't be late! That means you too, Fili!* "

" *Hey, why pick on* me *?* " Pinkie demanded. " *Zapp is the one who doesn't wanna wear her commlink to sleep!* "

" *Because it's downright stupid to be wearing these all the time!* " Rainbow exclaimed. " *I don't need you guys yammering in my ear all day and all night! Especially when like, I don't know, Matter-Horn is contacting Mare-velous and doesn't need to talk to me! Isn't there a way we can just talk to each other without hearing other ponies' conversations?!* "

" *There's no time for this!* " Spike shouted. " *This is an emergency!* "

" *But these earbuds…* "

" *Tower! Now!* "

Once every pony was at headquarters, Humdrum caught the girls up on what he knew about Sombra.

"So you mean to tell us," Mare-velous said, "that this Dr. Sargon guy turned himself into a living *shadow* ?!"

"Yup," Humdrum said with a nod.

"On *purpose* ?!"

"Yup."

"But he did it to help his true love!" Radiance said with a sigh. "Oh, how romantic!"

"True love or not," Zapp said, "that guy has a few screws loose."

"Yeah," Fili-Second said, "I mean what was he thinking injecting himself with some icky shadow-making serum? He really should take the time to think before doing something so reckless!" Mare-velous glared at her. "What?"

Shaking her head, Mare-velous turned back to Humdrum. "Can't ya track Twilight's commlink?"

"Already tried," Humdrum said, pointing to the monitor. "But something's jammed the signal. According to the computer, her commlink went offline while she was at Dr. Sargon's old apartment. She said if he was alive, he was sure to contact his roommate, so Twilight went over to ask Dr. Hope some questions."

"I reckon Dr. Sargon didn't like that," Mare-velous said, crossing her hooves. "So he decided to silence her."

Saddle Rager gasped. "You don't suppose Twilight's…?"

"No," Humdrum said. "I asked Fili-Second to stop by the apartment on the way here."

"No pony home," Fili-Second said. "No sign of a struggle. In fact, that Dr. Hope keeps the place pretty tidy."

"And even if Twilight were…" Humdrum bit his lip. "Her commlink would still be giving off a signal. But the computer's not registering it. It's almost as if she disappeared off the face of the earth."

"So if we can't contact Twilight," Radiance said, tapping her chin, "and we can't track her commlink, how in the world are we supposed to find her?"

"We gotta think like her kidnapper," Mare-velous said as she began pacing. "Think. What do we know about this Dr. Sargon? Where would he go for safety?"

"Well, we already know he's not at his apartment," Zapp said.

"I'll pull up his profile from the Sparkle Labs' employee database," Humdrum said, typing commands into the computer.

"What about his old lab?" Saddle Rager asked.

"I doubt he'd go back there so soon," Mare-velous said. "Spike and Twilight saw him there. It'd be too risky."

"Here we go," Humdrum said as a window popped up onscreen bearing Sombra's picture and some text which Humdrum began skimming. "Let's see…Dr. Sombra Sargon, PhD. Born in the Crystal Empire, was found abandoned as a young foal, taken in at the Crystal Heart Foal Center, graduated from the Crystal University of Science and Magic…"

"You don't think he's taken Twilight to the Crystal Empire, do you?" Saddle Rager asked.

"Ooh, ooh!" Radiance said, raising her hoof. "I certainly wouldn't mind checking out the Crystal Empire!"

"Uh-uh," Mare-velous said, shaking her head. "If Dr. Sargon's

molecules are out of whack or whatever, then he wouldn't have the energy to travel so far. What else ya got, Humdrum?"

Humdrum rolled his eyes. "We *really* need to come up with a better sidekick name for me!" He scrolled down Sombra's profile page. "Okay, how 'bout this? A few years before his roommate's accident, he and she would volunteer down at the homeless shelter."

Zapp huffed. "There's no way he'd be stupid enough to take her *there* ! There'd be all those homeless ponies sleeping about!"

"Yes, but this was at the *old* homeless shelter." Humdrum brought up a webpage showing an old, broken-down building. "That place had to be shut down after an accident involving a hydra and a giant banana." The mares looked at him strangely. "Don't ask. Anyway, the shelter was moved to a much larger building which Twilight had commissioned herself. The realtors couldn't get the old property sold, so the old shelter's just sitting there, abandoned."

"You think Dr. Sargon might have chosen that old shelter as his hiding place?" Radiance asked.

"It's not far from his apartment," Mare-velous said, rubbing her chin in thought, "it has a personal connection with him, and it's abandoned, so no pony'd be usin' it. Not to mention the electricity'd probably be out, so he can use the darkness to his advantage. It's worth a gander."

"I'll go scout ahead!" Fili-Second exclaimed, her legs moving rapidly in preparation.

"No!" Mare-velous said, lassoing her before she could run off. "We don't know what we're up against! We gotta be cautious!"

Zapp snorted. "Cautious is my middle name! Rainbow Cautious Dash!"

Mare-velous rolled her eyes. "We'll go together." She eyed Fili-Second. "And we'll go *quietly* . Humdrum, you stay here and see if you can get Twilight's commlink back online."

"On it!" Humdrum said, saluting before turning back to the computer.

"Rest of y'all, follow me!"

Fili-Second cried out as Demeter's Lasso whirled off her body, causing her to spin. Zapp stopped her with her hooves. They both pouted as Mare-velous led Saddle Rager and Radiance out.

"Who put *her* in charge?" Zapp whispered to Fili-Second.

The latter shrugged. "First come, first serve?"

At the abandoned homeless shelter, Sombra had Radiant Hope turn the old kitchen into a laboratory. The test tubes containing the serum were in place of the spice rack. Twilight was tied up in a chair in the corner. The shocking ordeal of being encased in darkness had left her unconscious. Her horn was speckled with dark crystals, a result of an enchantment Sombra had placed to block her magic.

As Hope was dusting the kitchen counter, Sombra returned from his outing and carefully lowered beakers, safety goggles, Bunsen burners and other lab equipment onto the counter.

"Is that all we need?" Hope asked in a tired voice.

"We might need specific ingredients," Sombra said, glancing at Twilight. "Perhaps she can help us come up with them."

Hope bit her lip. "S-Sombra? Once we…permanently stabilize your molecules…w-what then?"

Sombra chuckled. "Why, then you can take the serum and not have to worry about any side effects, and you'll be able to move around again."

"Yes, yes, but then what? Do you think any hospitals will have a…a shadow work for them?"

He huffed. "Who needs hospitals? With the freedom we'll have, we won't need any jobs. We can just take what we want. And who would be able to catch us? No pony can catch a shadow!" His eyes gleamed maliciously. "We can even make sure those naysayers

who denied you the life you deserve get what's coming to them."

"Sombra," Hope said steadily, "please, this is getting out of hoof. This…." She glanced at Twilight's unconscious form. "I never asked for any of this!"

"I doing all this for you, Hope," Sombra said, cupping her chin. "I only have your best interests at heart."

She narrowed her eyes as she pulled her face away. "That's exactly what the ponies at the hospital said when I asked to come back to work."

Sombra's glowing grin disappeared.

"You say you're doing this for me," Hope said, refusing to make eye contact with him. "Maybe it was for me at first, but…all this talk of… stealing and…and murder? How is any of that for me?" She raised her gaze. "Face it, Sombra. Being in this freeform state has gone to your head. Yes, it would be a miracle if I could walk again, but Sombra… *nothing* is worth all this! Not even me." Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked him over. "Look at you. Look at what you've become…for me."

Sombra stared at Hope for the longest time. Then he heard a moan from behind him. Twilight was slowly coming to. He glared at Hope.

"Fine," he said. "Don't take the serum. But you *will* help me! No matter what you think of me, you will *not* let me die!"

Hope hung her head in defeat. "No. I will not."

They both jumped at the sound of a door breaking down.

"Twilight!" a voice called. "Twilight, ya in here?"

Sombra grinned toothily. "It seems we have visitors." He floated over to the kitchen door. "Let's give them a warm welcome, shall we?"

Hope gulped, but did not try to stop him. He was too far gone to be stopped.

The five Power Ponies were in the old cafeteria. The tables were covered in dust and several chairs had been knocked over.

"Oh m-m-my," Saddle Rager said with a shiver. "It's…r-r-really dark in here!"

"Admittedly," Zapp said, squinting, "a flashlight would've been nice."

"I can ignite my horn," Radiance offered.

"Not yet," Mare-velous said, holding up her hoof. "We need to use the darkness to our advantage. Be best if Dr. Sargon couldn't see us yet."

Suddenly, a deep laugh echoed throughout the room. Saddle Rager squeaked and hid behind Mistress Mare-velous.

"You really think the darkness is going to save you?" Sombra asked. "Foolish mares…"

Radiance shrieked as she felt a cold chill above her head. The voice spoke again. This time, it sounded as if he were whispering in all their ears.

"I *am* darkness."

"Radiance, we need light!" Mare-velous shouted.

Wincing, Radiance attempted to ignite her horn, but nothing happened. She raised her hoof to the tip and yelped.

"It's…it's all lumpy!" Radiance exclaimed. "I…I can't light it! He did something to my horn!"

"Power Ponies," Sombra said. "I should have figured you would come after me eventually."

"What have ya done with Twilight Sparkle?!" Mare-velous demanded.

"She is alive, I assure you." He chuckled. "For now."

Zapp growled. "You better not hurt her, or I'll…"

"Zapp, restrain yourself!" Mare-velous said before addressing the darkness again. "Dr. Sargon, if you don't stop this madness…"

"I'm not Dr. Sargon anymore," Sombra said.

He then made himself known. His eyes and mouth opened before the heroes, giving off an eerie glow on them all. They all recoiled in fright, Saddle Rager fainting.

"I'm the Shadow King!" he said with a hiss.

"King, huh?" Mare-velous said. "Well, if you're royalty now…"

She summoned her lasso, which glowed as it swung about.

"…you must be really *tied up* with all those royal duties!"

The rope snapped forward, but the loop fell right through the shadowy face. Sombra laughed in amusement while Mare-velous' eye widened.

"I don't have a solid form anymore," Sombra said. "Your rope is useless."

He then opened his jaw so wide that it was larger than the height of a pony. The jaw swept towards the mares who shrieked and dispersed as the jaw closed down on them.

With the glow of the teeth gone, Zapp stopped and glanced around at the infinite blackness.

"Girls?" she called. "You still there?"

"Zapp?" said Radiance's voice. "Is that you? I can't see anything and my horn's still not working!"

"Where's Saddle Rager?" shouted Mare-velous' voice, which sounded frantic. "Saddle Rager! Are you alright?!"

"Mare-velous, your rope!" Zapp called. "It'll give us some light!"

There was a golden glow in the middle of the room as Demeter's Lasso started to rise. Then there was a growl and a scream, and the rope's light went out as it dropped.

"Mare-velous?" Zapp said, raising her hoof above her eyes as she looked to where she thought she'd seen the rope.

"What happened, darling?" Radiance said. "Don't worry. I can get my bracelets to glow and we'll be able to—AH!"

Radiance was suddenly silenced as well.

"Radiance?" Zapp said. "Mare-velous? Saddle Rager?"

She gasped as Sombra's smoking eyes appeared before her. His jaw opened and he charged for her. He was just inches away when something attacked Zapp's middle and she was whisked away. Sombra growled in fury.

When Zapp and her savior finally stopped, they seemed to be in a different room. The faint light from the boarded up windows illuminated a row of old cots, suggesting that this had been a sleeping area for the homeless ponies.

"What the…?" Zapp said, slightly disoriented.

"It's me, Zapp!" a high-pitched voice said.

An assuring hoof squeezed Zapp's.

"Fili?" Zapp said. "How…?"

"Fastest thing alive, remember?" Fili-Second said with a snort. "It was easy to get away from him. But the others…" She trailed off. "I couldn't see them, Zapp! I couldn't get to them in time! I was only able to find you because you kept shouting…" She shook Zapp in panic. "Zapp, are they dead?!"

"Hang on," Zapp said as she pressed down on her commlink. "Power Ponies, do you read me?"

There was nothing but static.

"Strange. We should at least be able to contact Spike. The Shadow King's shadowy stuff must be interfering with our commlinks somehow."

"What do we do?!" Fili-Second exclaimed. "We can't run from him forever! I mean I probably could but what about the others?! It's too dark to see and we can't punch the guy cuz he's not solid and we still don't know where Twilight is and…"

"Shush!"

Zapp swiftly placed her hoof over her comrade's mouth. The pegasus' ear twitched as she heard heavy breathing that didn't belong to either of them.

"He's close," Zapp whispered. "Look, obviously just punching him in the face is not gonna work. Remember what Matter-Horn and Mare-velous said. We need to take time to think of a plan to stop him."

"How?" Fili-Second asked, tugging her mouth away so she could speak softly. "It's hard to think when I'm worried he's gonna jump out at any moment! I'm fast, but I need to be able to listen for him to know when he's gonna strike!"

"But there are two of us here." She wrapped both forelegs around the earth mare's neck and hoisted herself onto her back. "I'll try to think of something. You just concentrate on keeping us both away from Shadow Breath."

Just as she said this, she felt a cold breath on the back of her neck.

"Fili, run!" Zapp shouted.

Fili-Second yelped as she zipped out of the sleeping quarters.

"Let's see," Zapp said in thought. "He's not solid, so we can't hit him. We have to find a way to contain him, but he's a shadow. Err…can you put shadows in a jar?"

"Can you not think so loud?!" Fili-Second exclaimed as she dodged Sombra's jaws. "It's hard to hear Shadow Breath!"

"Sorry," Zapp whispered.

She wracked her brain for ideas, but it was difficult with Fili-Second jolting her to and fro as she narrowly escaped the Shadow King's attacks. Zapp tried her best to keep quiet so her partner could concentrate, biting down on her lip whenever she had the urge to cry out.

Come on, come on, Zapp thought. *The dude's gotta have a weakness. If he's not solid, what can we—DANG, that was close! He's just a shadow, so what—YIPES, he almost got my tail! There's gotta be something he's afraid of that we can use against him.*

Then she remembered something Daring Do had once told her: *To pinpoint your opponent's weakness, you have to watch them carefully. Eventually they will betray themselves.*

Well, it was hard to watch her opponent when he was cloaked in darkness. Even when he showed himself, Fili-Second would move too fast for her to get a good look at him. Zapp concluded that she would have to use her other senses.

Everything she knew about the Shadow King, she had learned from the briefing earlier and from their current encounter. She replayed the events leading up to this moment in her mind. Despite having the advantage of the darkness, Sombra had chosen not to kill them right away. Instead, he had introduced himself. Clearly, he had a bit of an ego.

But he had done something else too. Radiance had attempted to ignite her horn, only to find it "lumpy." Somehow, Sombra had blocked her magic. But why?

Zapp then remembered what had happened right before Marevelous had disappeared. She had been getting her rope to glow. And Radiance was going to attempt to use her bracelets, which had the ability to glow too. Sombra had silenced them before they could.

For the same reason he had blocked Radiance's magic.

"Light!" Zapp exclaimed.

"Where?" Fili-Second asked, spinning around like a dog chasing her tail.

"No! The Shadow King's a shadow! Made of darkness! He's afraid of light!" She slapped herself in the forehead. "Duh!"

"So what do we do? Find a light switch?"

"Power's out, remember? That's why he chose this place."

"Then how we gonna get some light in here?

"Uh…light the world's biggest candle?"

Fili-Second gasped suddenly. "Or the world's biggest lightning storm!"

Zapp frowned. "What?"

"Your lightning!" Fili-Second said, turning her head to face her. "We're gonna need it! We're gonna need a *whole* lot of it!"

"B-B-But…" Zapp stammered. "Lightning only flashes! And I've never made a storm of that size that could…even if it did distract him, how we gonna be able to hold him?!"

"Maybe if we were in a really, really, really tight space, he wouldn't be able to escape the lightning so easily! I think I passed by a broom closet a few miles back."

"A broom closet?! Fili, do you have any idea how dangerous it would be to start a storm in a broom closet?! It's reckless!"

"I know it's reckless, but if it means stopping that bad guy and finding our friends, isn't it worth the risk?"

Zapp was reminded of her last phone call to Daring Do.

"Okay. Take me to the broom closet. But you can't be around once I get the storm started. Lightning can't hurt me, but it might hurt you."

"Okie dokie lokie!"

She zipped off and brought them both into a broom closet, colliding into a pile of cleaning supplies.

"Ugh," Zapp said as she popped her head out of a bucket. "I'll need a little time to concentrate on the storm. Think you can distract old Shadow Breath for a while?"

Although she couldn't see it, Zapp could imagine Fili-Second saluting as she said, "You got it!"

She felt the breeze from her friend's run and heard the door slam, leaving Zapp in complete darkness. Touching her pendant, she looked down at it unsurely.

She could barely get a regular-sized storm going without screwing up. How was she going to summon a mega-storm with enough lightning to stop Sombra in his tracks? Not to mention being in a dark enclosed space was making her slightly claustrophobic.

Mare-velous never has problems with her rope , she thought. *She would know what to do.*

As bossy and stubborn as Mistress Mare-velous was, Zapp couldn't help but admire how she always kept her cool in desperate situations. When the two of them first met, it was Mare-velous who had helped her gain control over the storm. She could just imagine Mare-velous' voice lecturing her:

You're thinkin' too much. Clear yerr mind, channel yerr emotions. Yerr fear is makin' this storm worse. Just calm yourself, and the storm'll follow. As ya breathe in, let all yerr thoughts and fears come together.

Zapp took a deep breath in.

Now, as ya let yerr breath out, let all yerr thoughts and fears go with it.

As she released her breath, the lightning bolt started to glow.

Don't fight the storm. Feel it. Become one with it. You are the storm, the storm is you. Its will is yours.

She had seen Mare-velous talk with her rope a lot, as if it were a living being. Zapp wondered if she should do the same with her source of power.

"Um…hi?" she said unsurely to the pendant. "Look, I know this is a tall order, but…I'm really gonna need your help in making this storm."

She heard a thump from outside and decided she should continue her conversation in her head.

Okay, Zeus, she prayed, holding the glowing pendant close to her chest. *I, um, haven't really been much for praying before, but…if you can hear me, I wouldn't mind a little helping hoof.*

The pendant seemed to glow brighter.

Alright, Zapp, she thought as she attempted to stand. *You can do this.* She took another deep breath. *You are the storm, and the storm is you. You are the storm, and the storm is you.*

As she repeated the phrase over and over again in her head, a dark cloud began forming over her head and thunder rumbled. Outside, Fili-Second heard the thunder and took that as her cue.

"Hey, Shadow Breath!" she hollered to the darkness. "Betcha can't catch me!"

As she ran towards the closet, she heard the angry growl coming up behind her.

Meanwhile, Zapp's storm cloud had grown to fill the upper half of the closet. She heard the door pop open and Fili-Second cry, "In here, Shadow Breath!"

"Enough of this!" Sombra shouted as he charged for Fili-Second.

But she whizzed past him and shut the closet door on him before he could catch her. He glanced around the closet in confusion.

"What? What is…?"

"Now, Zapp!" Fili-Second called from outside.

Almighty Zeus , Zapp prayed again, *King of the Olympian Gods, Chief Overseer of the Heavens, give me strength, and help me defeat this jerk!*

When she opened her eyes, they were glowing white, making Sombra recoil. Then, with a might crash, lightning struck overhead, flooding the room with light. Sombra wailed in agony, but calmed down once the light subsided. However, Zapp did not allow him a lot of time to recover, for lightning flashed again a split-second afterwards, striking a metal bucket.

Sparks were dancing around Zapp's body and mane, not allowing Sombra a single moment to move. He writhed and twisted in the air, trying to get away from the light trap. He tried disappearing through the door, but the lightning kept coming.

"Please!" he cried out. "You'll…destroy…me…if…you…keep…"

Suddenly, the door swung open and a streak of blue shot at the shadow bundle. Sombra screamed as he was encased in a blue sphere. Zapp shook her head in confusion. When her eyes opened again, they were back to normal, and the storm calmed.

She and Fili-Second watched in amazement as a glowing blue chain wrapped around the sphere entrapping Sombra. It was then sealed with an enormous blue padlock. Zapp peered around to see who their savior was.

Hope sat there in her chair, her eyes narrowed as her magic concentrated on the sphere.

"Dr. Hope, I presume?" Fili-Second said.

"Your friends are fine," Hope said. "He merely used his darkness to disorient them into unconsciousness." She winced in pain. "I don't know how much longer I'll be able to hold him."

"You won't have to for long," Twilight said as she stepped out of the darkness. Her horn had been returned to normal, thanks to Hope, so she used her magic to assist the other unicorn with the containment.

"I have just the place for him."

Zapp and Fili-Second waited until their comrades had awoken before joining Twilight back at Sparkle Labs. When they got there, Sombra was inside a large, magical pink box, hovering inside in a shadowy mass. Twilight and Hope were looking up at him solemnly.

"That spell you used to contain him was very powerful," Twilight said to Hope. "It's stabilized his molecules, for now." She turned to her. "The shield should be able to hold him until we can find a cure."

Hope nodded. "You'll do everything you can?"

Twilight smiled softly. "Of course. Perhaps you can help us. You seem to know quite a lot about healing magic which so far has been useful. Would you consider coming to work here? We don't discriminate on disabilities. Instead, we focus on what our employees *are* able to do, and you're clearly able to do a lot. Besides," she said, tilting her head towards Sombra, "it would allow you plenty of time to visit."

Hope looked at Twilight and grinned slightly. "I…I'd like that very much."

"Then I'll see you Monday." They shook hooves. "Oh! I nearly forgot. Those test tubes Sombra brought to the shelter. That was *all* the serum he made, right?"

Hope was silent for a moment. "Yes. That was all of it." She turned back to Sombra. "Could you give us a minute?"

"Of course."

Twilight backed away to where the Power Ponies were standing. Hope rolled her chair up to the magical force field. Sombra's glowing, sad eyes were focused on her.

"Hope," he said, his voice sounding broken. "I…I'm so sorry."

She raised her hoof up to touch the force field. "I know."

Twilight turned to her comrades. "Good work, girls. Hopefully, my scientists can take it from here."

"S-Sorry we were out for most of it," Saddle Rager murmured.

"That's alright," Twilight said, looking to Fili-Second and Zapp. "It certainly gave you two a chance to really prove yourselves."

Zapp blushed. "Aw, shucks. It was nothing."

She cried out as Mare-velous slapped her on the back. For a moment, she thought the earth mare was going to shout at her, until Mare-velous wrapped her hoof around her neck.

"It was something, alright!" she said. "You really stepped up tonight! Both of y'all!" She sighed. "Sorry I doubted y'all. When the situation was tough, your reckless behavior came in handy."

"Yeah, well," Zapp said as she wriggled out of Mare-velous' hold, "we wouldn't have gotten out of there had we not taken the time to think like you said." She circled her hoof in the floor. "You…you may be a bit of a…"

"Bossy boots!" Fili-Second piped.

"Err…yeah, but…all that stuff you'd told me about…keeping calm and…thinking and not thinking when it was necessary…it really helped me… *us* , through all that. Being impulsive can save your life, but sometimes," she looked to Fili-Second, "you need to slow down a moment to think things through. And I wouldn't've been able to do that had it not been for Fili's reflexes."

"Fastest pony alive!" Fili-Second said proudly.

Mare-velous smirked. "I was wrong about y'all." She hooked her hooves around both of them. "Ya really do have the makings of heroes."

"Oh!" Fili-Second said, grabbing Mare-velous. "That reminds me! Can I talk to you for once second?"

Before Mare-velous could answer, Fili-Second whizzed her out of

the lab and the next thing she knew, they were in Mare-velous' apartment.

"What…?" Mare-velous started to say.

Fili-Second sighed. "I'll cut to the chase. I want to stop being late to every mission, despite being the fastest mare alive. However, I can't do that if I'm going to continue living and working at the rock farm where my parents are going to be breathing down my neck all the time. So, I've decided I'm moving to Maretropolis, but I'm gonna need a job first."

She looked up at her comrade. "Fluttershy told me you plan to open a bakery someday."

Mare-velous nodded. "Yeah, once I have the money."

"If it's money you want…"

She zipped off and then returned a second later with a large sack and dumped it out. Mare-velous' jaw dropped as golden bits piled up in front of her.

"Are my whole life savings enough?" Fili-Second asked. "Turns out when you're the only family in the rock business for miles around, you get a lot of business!" She snorted. "Ain't monopolies great?"

"I…" Mare-velous said, shaking her head. "I can't accept this. Nothing personal. Twilight offered to donate money too, but I can't accept charity. It won't feel right if I hadn't worked for it."

"Oh, I'm not just *giving* you the money. Not that I hate you, Mare-velous. In fact, after today, I like you a lot more than I did before, but I wouldn't just dump my life savings on one friend just like that!" She huffed. "I'm not *stupid* ! This isn't a donation. It's an investment. I'm offering to be your partner. Not like a partner in the hero-biz like we already are, but partner in the *baking* -biz."

Mare-velous raised an eyebrow skeptically. "How do I know you can bake?"

Fili-Second smirked before zooming into the kitchen. Mare-velous

watched as she rapidly opened and closed cabinets and dropped ingredients into a mixing bowl. When she finally stopped, there was a cake pan in the oven.

"Of course," Fili-Second said, "I can't rush the oven. I tried that once and I do *not* want to cause another nuclear explosion!" She looked at Mare-velous seriously. "I know I can be reckless sometimes, but I am a hard worker, especially when it's something I'm passionate about. And, you know, if we had our own business, we could open and close the place whenever we wanted to and not have to worry about getting in trouble with the boss for skipping work to fight bad guys because *we'd* be the bosses. So whaddya think?"

Mare-velous glanced at the cake in the oven, then back at her. "We'll see how the cake tastes first."

Fili-Second squealed as she threw her hooves around the other mare. "This is gonna be great, partner!"

Mare-velous flinched slightly at the physical contact, but she slowly smiled as she patted her new friend on the back. "Yeah. Partner."

It was nearly morning when Hope returned to her apartment, and she was about ready to collapse onto the couch. Before she did, however, she glanced around the room, checked that the blinds were closed and rolled over to Sombra's bedroom.

She magically opened the top drawer to his dresser and peered inside. Taking out all the bundles of socks, she found a tiny, corked vial containing purple liquid. Using her magic, she levitated it up to her face.

"I'll fix you, Sombra," she said, her eyes narrowing in determination. "No matter what it takes."

As much as I'd like to move on to the next saga in here, I've recently developed a new fanfic idea. I've been reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Black Arrow* and think it would make a

good AppleSpike fic. It's an adventure story taking place in the War of the Roses. It's also a romance I didn't quite expect from a 19th century novel. Think it'd be something you all would be interested in seeing?

The Sirens' Song: Part 1

Best part of 1000-word-a-day goal is that it allows you to work on multiple writing projects.

Also, 13th chapter on the 13th!

"Stand up for what is right, even if you stand alone."

- Suzy Kassem

Fluttershy smiled as she felt the sunlight from her bedroom window shine on her face. Her eyes opened when she felt tiny paws on her side. Turning her head, she saw Angel hopping on top of her, his nose twitching adorably.

"Good morning, Angel," Fluttershy said, giggling as she took the bunny in her hooves. "Did you sleep well?"

He squeaked in response.

"I did too." Climbing out of bed, she went towards the window. "I don't know about you, but I've never felt so well-rested in my life!" Her cheeks flushed. "Might have to do with that dream I had."

She opened the window and looked out at the cityscape. What she loved most about her apartment was the view she got of the Maretropolis Park. The sun was shining, birds were chirping, the squirrels were scattering about down below.

"Oh, it's such a beautiful morning!" she said, inhaling the fresh air. "I feel like singing!"

She twirled her rabbit around as she filled the room with "la da dee das." She continued singing absentmindedly as she showered, changed clothes, and went into the kitchen for breakfast. She fed

Angel his food pellets before getting out the pancake mix.

" *There's music in the treetops,* " she sang as she flipped the pancakes.

" *And there's music in the vale,*

And all around me music fills the sky. "

Angel tilted his head from side to side, feeling the beat of her beautiful song.

" *There's music by the river,*

And there's music in the grass,

And the music makes your heart soar in re— "

She froze when she heard a bark, causing her to flip one pancake so high that it stuck to the ceiling. Turning, she saw Wynona on a leash, wagging her tail excitedly. Holding that leash was Applejack. Pinkie Pie, in her ridiculous glasses, stood by her. Both their mouths were open wide.

"Oh, um," Fluttershy said, biting her lip. "A-Applejack, I thought…I thought you would've gone to your apple cart by now."

Applejack blinked. "W-Well, yeah, but…I was just takin' Wynona for a walk when I ran into Pinkie and we were gonna look at some properties for our bakery and…"

"Are we gonna ignore the fact that Fluttershy was just SINGING IN THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VOICE EVER?!" Pinkie shouted excitedly.

Blushing, Fluttershy returned to her pancakes. "Oh, I was just…it was nothing."

Pinkie scoffed. "You kidding?! When we stepped in here, we thought this place had been invaded by an angel or something!"

"I've never heard ya sing before, Sugar Cube," Applejack said in awe. "That was…heavenly."

Fluttershy's mane drooped over her face. "Let's just…forget about it."

"Forget about it?!" Pinkie yelled. "How can you forget something like *that* ?! You might as well forget sparkles falling from the sky!"

"That actually reminds me," Applejack said. "Rarity called this mornin'. It's Karaoke Night over at the *La Comida* restaurant. I'm not much for karaoke, but…maybe if you're not busy tonight?"

"Yeah!"

Fluttershy squeaked as Pinkie suddenly wrapped her hoof around her neck.

"You should *totally* sing something tonight!" Pinkie exclaimed. "With all those ponies watching you, listening to your amazing voice, you could bring the house down on them so hard they'll all have to go to the hospital because your voice is that amazing!"

Yelping, Fluttershy buried her face in her hooves.

"Think ya overdid it, Pinkie," Applejack said, pushing the pink mare aside so she could talk to her roommate. "You alright, Sugar?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "I just…I've never performed in front of other ponies before and…" She looked at Applejack with pleading eyes. "Please, please, don't tell any pony you heard me sing. I…I won't be able to handle it if I had to sing in front of other ponies."

"Hey, hey," Applejack said, patting her on the back. "Ya don't have to sing karaoke if ya don't wanna, but you should still come tonight. We could get a bite, hang with the girls, might be fun." She sighed. "Besides, with all the Power Ponies stuff plus Pinkie and I tryin' to get this bakery started, we could really use the break."

"Yeah!" Pinkie piped. "I mean I've been running to and fro from here and there to the rock farm and back, trying to find a place to crash, trying to find a place for the bakery, ya gonna eat those pancakes?"

Fluttershy smiled slightly as she stacked half of the pancakes onto a plate for Pinkie. She gobbled them up right away.

"I'll go out with you girls tonight," Fluttershy said. "But I'm not singing."

Applejack returned her smile. "No pony's forcin' ya to."

Fluttershy was about to flip the next pancake when she realized her frying pan was bare. She and Applejack turned to Pinkie, who had stuffed cheeks and batter on her hooves.

"What?" she said with her mouth full.

That night at *La Comida* , Rarity, Coco Pommel, Applejack and Fluttershy were sitting in a booth, munching on the nachos they'd been given as an appetizer. Pinkie was singing a rock ballad onstage, very loud and sending ear-piercing feedback through the mic every few notes.

"You sure you won't be able to make it, Twilight?" Rarity asked on her cellphone.

" *Sorry, girls* ," Twilight said on the other end. " *But I'm at the Maretropolis Stadium setting up for the New Voices Singing Competition. It'll raise a lot of money for the new children's hospital.* "

"Oh, but you're *always* working, darling! Whether it's as Twilight Sparkle or…" She glanced around the restaurant. "You know. We've been working together for months now, and not once have we ever gotten together socially!"

" *Maybe it's for the best. If the entire team hung out together all the time, we'd be at risk of exposing ourselves. I mean six mares and a young dragon all together at once? Ponies are sure to notice.* "

Rarity sighed. "Alright. But you should still take the time to…"

She winced as Pinkie wailed into her mic.

" *What was that? Trouble?!* "

"No," Rarity said with a groan. "Just Pinkie Pie 'rocking out,' as it were."

When Rarity hung up, Rainbow Dash approached their table.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, sitting next to Fluttershy on the end. "My wallet was stolen and I had to get it back."

Applejack scoffed. "Some pony tried to pick *your* pocket?"

"Yeah," Dash said, running her hoof over the pendant tucked into her shirt. "Let's just say the weather got unexpectedly rough."

"Are you going to give it a whirl?" Rarity asked, tilting her head towards the stage.

Rainbow put up her hooves. "I don't do karaoke. I just came for the nachos."

She grabbed a hoofful from the bowl in the center of the table and stuffed it in her mouth. Rarity cringed at the cheese dripping from her mouth.

"What about you guys?" Rainbow asked, her mouth still full.

"My slot is the fifth one after Pinkie," Rarity said. "I'm going to sing a song by Sapphire Shores."

"I don't really sing," Coco said, rubbing her foreleg awkwardly.

"Me neither," Fluttershy murmured.

Rainbow huffed. "That's rich! You should've heard this girl at the Flight Camp Talent Show! I mean she sang like a—YOW!"

Applejack had kicked her from across the table, sending her a warning glare.

When Pinkie Pie was finished, the restaurant host hastened her off the stage.

"How'd I do?" Pinkie asked as she scooted into the booth with her

friends.

They all forced smiles and said, "Greeeeaaaaaat."

"Okay," the host said into the mic, clearing his throat. "That certainly was…interesting!" He checked his clipboard with the karaoke sign-up sheet. "Our next performer is Applejack, who will be singing a song by Trotter Swift. And she's asked to provide her own accompaniment."

Applejack's friends watched her curiously as she made her way to the stage with an acoustic guitar in hoof.

"Huh," Rainbow said, glancing at the brown guitar case leaning against the side of the booth. "I wondered what that was doing there."

Pulling up a stool, Applejack sat in front of the mic. She sent Fluttershy a wink before strumming softly on her guitar. After a short instrumental, Applejack sang in a low, rich, country voice.

" *Seems the only one who doesn't see your beauty*

Is the face in the mirror lookin' back at you.

You walk around here thinkin' you're not pretty.

But that's not truuuuuue. "

As she held the last note, she made eye contact with Fluttershy. " *Cuz I know yooooooou.* "

"Wow," Coco said. "She's pretty good."

"Eh," Rainbow said, waving her hoof. "Country ponies always get the best voices."

When Applejack's song was finished, the audience erupted in applause. She softly thanked them as she made her way offstage and back to the table.

"That was amazing!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "I had no idea you could

sing."

"Neither did I," Applejack said.

But from the way she looked at Fluttershy, it was obvious Applejack was not talking about her own voice.

"I don't know *how* I'll be able to top *that* !" Rarity said, taking Applejack's hoof. "Well done, darling!"

"Next up," the host announced, "we have a group act from three talented, lovely young mares who are going places! Give it up for… the Dazzlings!"

As every pony applauded, three earth mares in glittering sequin dresses sauntered onstage.

"Ooh," Rarity said. " *Love* their gowns!"

"A bit overdressed for a karaoke night though, don't ya think?" Applejack asked.

"Oh, pish posh! There's no such thing as *overdressed* !"

The three mares circled around the microphone. The yellow mare in the center had an enormous, poofed up orange mane. The blue one on her right wore her mane in a sweeping blue ponytail with purple streaks, while the purple one on her left had two purple ponytails streaked with blue.

"This song is all about," the yellow one in the center said in a sultry voice, "pop."

The music started and on the second beat, all three mares shouted, "Pop!"

" *It's all about the pop* ," sang the yellow one.

" *Pop!* " said the blue.

" *It's what will take us to the top* ."

" *It's what's new, it's what's hot, and it can't be stopped* ," sang the purple.

" *Pop!* " they said together.

"Oh my," Fluttershy said, scrunching her nose in discomfort. "Um, they're…well…"

"They sound like screaming banshees!" Rainbow exclaimed, covering her ears. "They should've used *that* for their group name!"

"That's not a very nice thing to say," Applejack said with a wince. "No matter how true it is."

Funnily enough, no pony was booing them off the stage, so the Dazzlings kept going.

" *Pop is the word!* " the yellow mare sang. " *It can't be captured, only heard!* "

" *Pop burns!* " sang the blue.

" *It's what makes the world turn!"* sang the purple.

"They got that right," Rainbow said, lowering her head. "It certainly *pops* and *burns* my ears and makes my *head turn* ! Make it stop!"

"Oh, *you* stop, Rainbow Dash!" Rarity said, waving her hoof. "You clearly have no taste in music!"

Applejack, Rainbow and Fluttershy looked at her in surprise.

"Uh…what?" Applejack said.

"They're like angels singing," Coco said with a sigh.

"Forget angels!" Pinkie cried, slamming her hooves on the table. "They're like *goddesses* !"

The three mares that were still unimpressed with the Dazzlings' singing glanced between their friends and the mares onstage in confusion. Then Applejack looked around the room. None of the

other restaurant patrons were eating, as their focus was on the Dazzlings. Their expressions did not hold any disgust for their "singing," but awe and admiration.

The Dazzlings sang their last line together. " *It's the pop!* "

There was a moment of silence. Then every pony stood and clapped harder than they had all night. Every pony, that is, except Applejack, Rainbow and Fluttershy.

"Fabulous!" Rarity exclaimed.

"Astounding!" Coco said.

"Absatively wowza!" Pinkie cheered.

"Ooh!" Rarity said. "I wonder if they're entering that New Voices Singing Competition Twilight is hosting. They're sure to help her raise a lot of money for the new children's hospital!"

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "You want *them* to sing at a *charity* event?"

"Of course!"

"So much for that children's hospital," Rainbow mumbled.

Rarity rolled her eyes. "No taste! No taste whatsoever!"

Ponies were flocking to the stage, asking the Dazzlings for their autographs…and a few other things.

"You're beautiful!" a stallion said excitedly. "Can I have all your numbers?!"

"No fair!" said another stallion, pushing him out of the way. " *I* want their numbers!"

"No, *I* want their numbers!" shouted a mare.

" *I* want them to sing at my birthday party!" said a young filly.

" *I* want them to sing at my cute-ceañera!" said a colt.

"Oh dear," Rarity said. "I better get up there if I'm going to refer them to Twilight." Narrowing her eyes, she charged through the crowd. "Let me through, you ruffians!"

"I want their numbers too!" Pinkie cried, pulling out her phone. "That blue one's especially cute!" She noticed the weird looks from Applejack, Rainbow and Fluttershy. "What? Didn't I tell you girls I'm gender-blind?" She used her a little of her super speed to rush ahead. "HEY, I REALLY LIKE YOU!"

"I'm not gay," Coco said as she jumped out of her seat, "but *I* want their numbers too!"

Applejack, Rainbow and Fluttershy watched in puzzlement as their friends fought through the mob.

"Is it just me?" Applejack murmured. "Or did this entire restaurant suddenly become tone deaf?"

"Or *we've* become tone deaf," Rainbow said, inserting her hoof in her ear. "Can that happen?"

"Oh good," Fluttershy said with a relieved sigh. "So I wasn't the only one who thought they were awful."

"So wait a minute. If *you* ," Rainbow said, pointing to Fluttershy, "thought they were awful, and *you,* " then to Applejack, "thought they were awful, and *I* ," then to herself, "thought they were awful," and finally to the mob, "what's up with *them* ?"

"Probably has to do with their fancy dresses," Applejack said shaking her head. "Typical. Ponies see a few pretty faces and don't care how talented they really are."

"Oh my," Fluttershy said. "You don't think Twilight would really let them compete, would you? I worry about those poor sick foals who might not get their hospital."

"I don't think we have to worry about it. Twilight has better judgment than all these ponies. She would see through their pretty faces and fancy dresses lickety-split."

" *They're amazing!* "

Applejack dropped the soufflé she'd been making. She pressed down on her commlink to be sure she heard Twilight right.

"Say that again?"

" *The Dazzlings!* " Twilight said excitedly through the commlink. " *They're phenomenal! But I'll tell you, when Rarity brought them in this morning, insisting they enter the competition, I nearly turned them down as the entry deadline had already passed. But when they started singing, I just couldn't say no! I've never seen such talent! And believe me, I've heard a lot of talent from the entries so far.* "

Applejack blinked. "Really?"

" *I don't wanna get ahead of myself, but they're sure to get the winning record deal! These girls are going places!* "

She shook her head. "Any pony else gettin' this?"

" *I hear it* ," Rainbow's voice said, " *but I don't believe it.* "

" *Ignore them, Twilight!* " Rarity said. " *They're just jealous!* "

"Jealous?!" Applejack shouted.

" *Of course. After all, the Dazzlings received much more applause last night than you did.* "

"Listen here! This isn't about…"

She took a deep breath. Clearly, something weird was going on with these Dazzlings, and half her team wasn't going to be of much help. She needed to find out more about the Dazzlings, but she wasn't going to do that by insisting how terrible they were.

She needed to get into that competition.

"Um, Twilight?" she said into the commlink. "Ya think ya can do me a favor?"

" *Sure, AJ,* " Twilight said. " *What is it?* "

"This singing competition. It's at the stadium, right?"

" *Right.* "

"So ya must need food vendors."

" *Oh, yes. We've got carrot dog vendors, popcorn vendors. Ponies will be donating their profits of the night to the fundraiser.* "

"Great! Well, I wanna help with the hospital too, so…ya think it would be much trouble if I…?"

" *Hey!* " Pinkie's voice said. " *No business negotiations without your new partner!* " Her tone changed to a chipper one. " *Can we sell our baked goods at the competition please, Twilight?* "

Twilight laughed. " *We'd love it if you two would help out.* "

" *Yay! This'll be great! We'll get to help the hospital,* and *we'll get into see the Dazzlings! You think that blue one Sonata will call me?* "

" *Come to the rehearsal this afternoon. That's when all the vendors are setting up their booths.* "

"Thanks, Twi," Applejack said. "We'll be there." She glanced down at what was left of her soufflé. "After I clean this up."

While the stage was being set on the field of the stadium, vendors were setting their booths up in the walkways behind the stands. Pinkie had a paintbrush in her hoof as she looked up at the blank sign above their booth.

"Maybe we should combine our names somehow to make one catchy name," she said, tapping her chin with the tip of her brush. " *Apple Pie* ? *Pinkie Jack* ? For some reason, *Pinkie Jack Daniels* sounds pretty catchy!"

But Applejack wasn't thinking about business names right now. She

was too busy looking down at the field, eyeing the three beautiful mares standing idly by the stage.

"I feel if we include "Applejack" in the name it'll sound like we're selling cereal! But of course I wanna share the credit so I won't just call it *Pinkie Pie's* . Maybe something sweet that'll make 'em think of sweets, like *Sugar* something or Applejack are you listening to me?"

"Huh?" Applejack said, snapping her head around. "Uh, sorry, Pinkie, I was, uh…"

Pinkie huffed. "Don't think I didn't notice you eyeing the Dazzlings!" She narrowed her eyes. "I know your game."

Applejack blinked. "You do?"

"It's *so* obvious." Pinkie grinned brightly. "You're smitten with them too! Can't blame ya, they're *gorgeous* !" She dashed to Applejack's side to whisper, "But stay away from the blue one. She's *mine* !"

Sighing, Applejack shook her head. "I'm not smitten with any pony." She noticed some of the stagehooves and other vendors ogling the Dazzlings. "I'm about the only one in this entire stadium who *isn't* smitten with those…those… *sirens* . How'd they even get into this competition? They're not even that good!"

"Oh, AJ, AJ, AJ," Pinkie said with a pitiful shake of her head. "You *really* should come to terms this whole jealousy thing here. Of course it's perfectly understandable. After all *no pony* can compare to how beautiful, talented, and downright *delicious* those Dazzlings are!"

"I'm tellin' ya, Pinkie! They're up to somethin'! Am I the only one who sees that?"

"Probably." Pinkie looked back at the blank wooden sign. "What do you think of *Dunkin' Donuts* ? Can you make donuts? Then again we should make the name generally apply to all treats…"

As Pinkie rambled on, the Dazzlings were going onstage to rehearse. Applejack rolled her eyes as every pony in the stadium dropped everything they were doing so they could watch, including

Pinkie, who dropped her paintbrush.

"Woo hoo!" Pinkie cheered. "Go Sonata! You rock, girl!"

Ripping open her pink raincoat, she revealed a t-shirt with the blue Dazzling's face on it. Applejack stared at it strangely.

"Where'd ya get that there shirt?"

"What?" Pinkie said with a shrug. "I make t-shirts of *every pony* I meet! I even have one of you!"

She ripped off her shirt to reveal another one with Applejack's face, putting a blush on the real face. As the music started to play, Pinkie tore the Applejack shirt to show another Sonata one. Then, much to Applejack's dismay, the Dazzlings started singing.

" *Oh-whoa-oh, oh-whoa-oh,*

You didn't know that you fell,

Oh-whoa-oh, oh-whoa-oh… "

Then the yellow mare in the middle spoke in a low voice into her microphone, " *Now that you're under our spell* ."

It took all of Applejack's willpower not to cover her poor, aching ears. To find out what was going on with these *sirens* , as she was now calling them, she needed to keep all her senses open and alert. She just hoped her ears could last through the whole song.

" *Listen to the sound of my voice* ," the yellow mare sang.

I'd rather not , Applejack thought.

" *Soon you'll find you don't have a choice.* "

"I can think of quite a few choices," Applejack murmured.

Then she caught a glimmer of red. *Three* glimmers, to be precise. Squinting, Applejack saw that each of the Dazzlings wore a round red jewel around their necks. And they were glowing.

What's more, they seemed to be absorbing something. A green mist. Applejack took a step back and looked around, realizing that practically the whole stadium was flooded with green mist.

"Did some pony turn on a fog machine or something?"

Slowly, the cheers for the Dazzlings began to change into a cacophony of angry shouts. Applejack looked back down at the field and saw several ponies that seemed to be arguing with each other.

"Pinkie, do ya see…?"

"Why aren't you watching the Dazzlings?!" Pinkie shouted, shaking her fiercely. "Can't you see they're amazing?!" She brought Applejack's face to hers. "Why aren't you watching?!"

"Pinkie, get ahold of yourself!" Applejack exclaimed, pushing her back.

"You know what I think, Applejack?" Pinkie said, crossing her hooves. "I don't think you're taking this whole baking business thing seriously! I mean *I'm* the one who's been trying to think of a name all afternoon while *you* keep ogling the Dazzlings and I *swear* if you try and ruin my chances with Sonata…"

Applejack gawked as the same green mist filling the stadium seemed to emit from Pinkie, who didn't appear to notice. Applejack watched as the mist floated down the stands, across the field and right over to the Dazzlings. She hadn't even realized their song had finished.

There was no applause, as every pony was too busy arguing with each other over…Applejack wasn't sure what. But she got a bit of an idea when Officer Flash Sentry, who was currently off-duty, stomped up the nearest aisle, pursued by Twilight.

"I was *not* checking them out!" Flash shouted over his shoulder.

"Oh, you *so* were!" Twilight yelled, pointing her hoof accusingly. "Your eyes were all over them, especially that Adagio!"

"They were *singing* ! Why is it suddenly so wrong to watch a couple

of mares perform?!"

"When all you can stare at is their *flanks* !"

"What about you, huh?" Flash said, spinning around. "You can't deny that *you* were ogling them too!"

Twilight scoffed. "How…wha…I don't even swing that way! What's *your* excuse?!"

Their voices drowned out as they walked higher up the stands and out of Applejack's hearing. It was strange. She hadn't taken Twilight to be the jealous type.

Ponies were arguing, Pinkie was still yelling at Applejack, there was mysterious mist everywhere and no pony else seemed to be aware of it. It was a terrible time for Applejack to receive nature's call.

"'Scuse me, Pinkie," Applejack said, pushing past her friend.

"I'm not finished with ya, Smith!" Pinkie shouted. "If you're not gonna invest fully into this partnership, we might have to cut your pay down to sixty-forty! Not to mention the costs that factor into…"

Applejack quickly shut the door to the ladies' room and let out a sigh of relief. Nobody else was in the bathroom, leaving Applejack to the serenity of a private toilet stall.

"Okay, AJ," she said as she shut the stall door. "Obviously there's some mysterious magic at work here, but what?"

She winced at admitting to herself that Twilight's magical knowledge would be very useful right about now. But Twilight was just as corrupted as the rest. Except for Applejack. Why hadn't she been affected by the Dazzlings' spell?

Applejack jumped when the bathroom door opened and she heard voices.

"Well done, girls!" a sultry voice said. "Marvelous performance! Though Aria, you were a little flat on the bridge."

Recognizing one of the Dazzlings' voices, Applejack quickly unlocked her stall door and lifted her hooves onto the toilet so they would assume they were alone.

"Not like it really mattered, Adagio," said a bored-sounding voice which Applejack assumed belonged to Aria. "They were still under our spell, weren't they?"

"And did you see all that negative energy that came from their fighting over us?" said a high-pitched, bubbly voice that reminded Applejack an awful lot of Pinkie Pie. "It was like an all-you-can-eat-buffet!"

"If you thought *this* was a feast," said the sultry one, Adagio, "imagine what tomorrow's competition will be like. All those seats will be filled with ponies with negative energy ripe for the picking."

"It's been so long since we've had this much attention," Aria said. "It's both endearing and overwhelming."

"Just look at all the numbers I've got!" said the bubbly one which Applejack figured to be Pinkie's favorite, Sonata. "We *really* should get cellphones so we call 'em!"

"No one said we had to actually *call* them, Sonata," Aria said. "We're not here to make friends. Besides, I can barely work one of those public phones with these thick hooves."

"You girls never let me meet *anybody* !" Applejack could imagine Sonata pouting. "Can't we have a *little* fun with *some* of these ponies while we're here? That pink mare who was wearing my face back there seemed like she'd be a good time."

Aria groaned. "Must you *always* play with your food before you eat it?"

"First, sisters," Adagio said, "we gain control of Maretropolis' citizens, then we win the record deal so we can take things on a… *global* scale. Then you morons can abuse that power however you want."

There was a slip, along with a yelp.

"I miss my fins!" Sonata whined.

"Agreed," Aria said with a moan. "I *hate* all this *walking* !"

"Now, now, girls," Adagio said. "You know it would've been impossible for us to walk on land in our *true* forms."

"If we'd kept our act underwater…"

"But the food is up here! You remember what Madame Circe said."

Applejack gasped and then covered her mouth too late. There was silence from outside. Then the stall was thrown open by the purple one. All three Dazzlings were glaring down at her.

Applejack grinned awkwardly. "Uh…don't suppose y'all would want my number, eh?"

The yellow one must've been Adagio, for she seemed to send silent commands to her compadres with her eyes.

"'Welcome to the Show?'" the purple one, Aria, said.

"Let's do "Under Our Spell" again!" Sonata piped.

"No need, girls," Adagio said, smirking at Applejack. "A few simple arias should do it."

The three of them opened their mouths to sing some 'ahs." To Applejack, they sounded like a cloud of bats screeching after being awoken midday.

"Sorry I'm more into country than opera!" Applejack said rapidly.

Before the Dazzlings could respond, Applejack dove onto the floor and through Adagio's legs. Quickly picking herself up, she dashed out of the bathroom. The Dazzlings had their mouths agape in surprise.

"Well don't just stand there!" Adagio exclaimed, smacking them both upside the head. "Get her, you idiots!"

Aria and Sonata raced out the door, Adagio following after them. They searched the walkway for Applejack.

"She's vanished!" Sonata said.

"Impossible!" Adagio said. "She wasn't a unicorn!"

Suddenly, a glowing rope lassoed around the three of them. With a mighty tug, it bound them together. The Dazzlings shrieked as they fell to the floor. Sonata flailed her hooves about, but that only made the lasso pull tighter.

"Demeter's Lasso!" Adagio cried.

"That's right, gals." Mistress Mare-velous's smirking face peered over them. "Not only is Ole Bessie pretty *tight* with crooks, but she can choke the truth outta ya like a swallowed apple seed."

The Dazzlings gasped as the golden light emitting from the rope washed over them. When it faded away, they had transformed. Their bodies were now scaly and hairless. The upper-halves remained equine, though taller and thinner, but their backsides had been replaced by fish tails. There were murmurs as ponies started gathering round.

"Ha!" Mare-velous said, pointing at the three hippocampi. "What I tell ya? Can't hide *anything* from Ole Bessie here!" She brought her face closer. "Y'all thought ya could manipulate these ponies so y'all could feed on…whatever it was y'all were feedin' on!" She set her front hoof on them. "But ya didn't fool me! No, sir!"

"Mistress Mare-velous…"

The hero turned to see Twilight approaching. To Mare-velous' surprise, she was looking at her appallingly.

"What are you doing to the Dazzlings?" Twilight asked.

Mare-velous blinked. "Huh?"

"She's tied up the Dazzlings!" a pony said.

"Mare-velous has flipped!" said another.

"Tying up three poor innocent mares! The nerve!"

"W-What are y'all talkin' about?" Mare-velous asked in confusion. "Look at 'em! Can't y'all see they were playin' y'all?!"

"Let those poor girls go!"

"Sonata!" Pinkie shouted as she pushed through the crowd. "I'll save you, baby!"

Mare-velous glanced around anxiously as ponies brought out their cameras and phones. A chuckle came from Adagio, making the hero look down at her.

"It doesn't matter if they see our true forms," Adagio said, smiling tauntingly. "They're already under our spell."

"The way they see it," Aria said, " *you* just tied up three innocent mares for no reason."

"Ooh," Sonata said, cringing. "That's not gonna look so good for you, is it?"

The crowd was closing in on Mare-velous.

"I'd hightail it out of here, if I were you, Soldier of Demeter," Adagio said. "Something tells me you're not willing to fight fifty civilians."

"No matter *how* angry they are!" Sonata piped.

Taking one last look at the furious crowd, Mare-velous willed the rope to untie the Dazzlings, thus returning them to their pony disguises.

"This ain't over," Mare-velous said, lassoing her rope on one of the steel trusses in the ceiling.

Grabbing hold, she jumped and swung away from the crowd, trying to block out their angry shouts all the while.

Songs Used (aside from the obvious):

"Tied Together With a Smile" by Taylor Swift

"Pop" song was from the IDW comic miniseries "FIENDship is Magic" in the Sirens' backstory.

I wanted to use the Dazzlings in this universe because I just LOVE them as villains, but was disappointed by the backstory given by the comics (not enough drive for them), so here was my opportunity to expand upon it. Trouble was figuring out how to use them without completely copying the "Rainbow Rocks" plot. Then it hit me. If some but not ALL of the Power Ponies were immune to the Sirens' singing, it would raise more conflict.

Just to clarify, I'm not a SonataxPinkie shipper. I do however find the ship cute (and logical) and put it in here for humor. It IS my headcanon, however, that the Dazzlings are sisters (which is why I DON'T ship them together). After all, why else would they work together if they obviously can't stand each other?

The Sirens' Song: Part 2

Rating changed to T for language...and some of these stories will be getting darker.

" *Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy."*

- Norman Vincent Peale

" *Today at the rehearsal for the New Voices Competition, Mistress Mare-velous shocked the world by tying up three beautiful young singers with her magical lasso for apparently no reason. Video footage and photos of the incident went viral within seconds.* "

Applejack gawked at the image that appeared on the television. It showed her standing over the tied up Dazzlings, only they were in their pony disguises and not their hippocampus forms. Fluttershy, who was sitting beside her on the couch, glanced at her sympathetically.

" *The three singers, who call themselves the Dazzlings, became an overnight sensation with their karaoke performance at a Mexican restaurant just last night. Mistress Mare-velous has yet to come forward about her impulsive, inexplicable display, but Twilight Sparkle, CEO of Sparkle Labs and chairpony of the New Voices Competition, had this to say.* "

"Oh no," Applejack said.

The footage switched to Twilight Sparkle at the stadium, speaking into a reporter's mic. " *I don't know* what's *gotten into Mistress Mare-velous, but I can assure you that this kind of behavior will* not *be tolerated from* any pony." She looked directly into the camera,

almost as if she were glaring right at Applejack. " *And we will do everything in our power to ensure that Mistress Mare-velous does* not *disrupt tomorrow's event.* "

" *While we were unable to get in touch with Mistress Mare-velous, fellow Power Pony Fili-Second was available for comment.* "

Fili-Second then appeared on camera. " *MM has gone totally ballistic! I don't know* why *she's so jealous of the Dazzlings! She's been going on and on about how terrible they sound since they got discovered! I swear the rest of us Power Ponies had nothing to do with this!* "

" *Twilight Sparkle has upped the security for the event to make sure this hero gone rogue does not…* "

Applejack switched the television off with the remote.

"It's, um," Fluttershy said, cringing, "not as bad as it looks…"

"It's all lies!" Applejack shouted, standing up. "I've *not* gone rogue! Those no-good Dazzlings are manipulatin' every pony!" She pointed to her ear. "I had to take my commlink out, everyone was shoutin' at me! Even Spike!" She began pacing. "And how'd they even change that picture? They didn't look like that when I tied 'em up! They must've convinced some pony to edit all the footage that was taken with their magic singin'!" She stopped and looked at her roommate. "You believe me, don't ya?"

"Of course I believe you," Fluttershy said. "I heard those girls too, and, while I don't mean to be judgmental, I didn't particularly like their singing either."

"That's what I can't figure out," Applejack said as she started pacing again. "How come you and I are the only ones still awake?"

Fluttershy pointed. "Don't forget Rainbow Dash! She didn't like them either."

"Yes. And what do we all have in common that we don't have in common with every pony else?"

"We have superpowers."

"But so do Twilight, Rarity and Pinkie, yet they're as spellbound as every pony else in Maretropolis. Hmm." She tapped her chin. "The Dazzlings had mentioned something about Circe, who was a sorcerous in Ancient Grace. Maybe there's a connection there. After all, Dash has Zeus' bolt, I have Demeter's lasso, and you…"

She stopped and turned slowly to Fluttershy.

"What?" Fluttershy asked. "What about me?"

Applejack gulped. "I…I'm not sure but…"

The front door burst open and Rainbow Dash flew in, carrying a book.

"I came as soon as I heard!" she said, slamming the door. "I only got bits and pieces through the commlink, but what you said about the Dazzlings being hippocampi…"

"Hippocampi?" Fluttershy asked.

"Pretty much horses with fishtails. They're distinct from mermares as they have longer bodies and are a whole lot scalier, but they are a heck of a lot smaller than kelpies."

She noticed Applejack's raised eyebrow.

"Don't look so surprised," Rainbow said. "Or did you forget I used to be an archaeological assistant *and* that I work at a museum? Anyway," she said as she flipped through her book, "the hippocampi *plus* the singing reminded me of a myth involving three sirens."

She set the book on the coffee table so her friends could see. The page had an illustration of three hippocampi sitting on rocks, their mouths open as if they were singing. One hippocampus was yellow, one was purple, and one was blue.

"That's them!" Applejack said, pointing her hoof on the page. "That's what the Dazzlings looked like when I tied 'em up!"

"Well," Rainbow said, her hoof pointing to the text, "according to this Gracian mythology book, these particular sirens were the result of a romance between the sea god Poseidon and a mermare," she winked, "if you catch my meaning. As if their looks weren't entrancing enough, their voices were more powerful than any creature on land or sea."

She turned the page. "You know the story of the Odyssey, right? Well," she pointed to a picture of a ship heading for the Sirens on the rocks, "these are supposedly the same Sirens who tried to lure Odysseus' ship to crash into the rocks. They only survived cuz the crew had covered her ears, but Odysseus had tied himself to the mast because he wanted to hear their beautiful singing."

"So how do we defeat them?" Applejack asked.

Rainbow shrugged. "Earplugs?"

Rolling her eyes, Applejack said, "We can't just plug the ears of every pony in Maretropolis! They're too entranced by the Dazzlings to listen to anythin' *we* say!"

"Well, the book doesn't say anything about how to reverse their spell, nor does it say anything about them making themselves to look like ponies."

"What about the mist?" Applejack asked.

"Mist?"

"When the Dazzlings were singin', there was green mist everywhere. Every pony was arguin', and…the mist seemed to be comin' from *them* and goin' into the Dazzlings' amulets."

Rainbow flipped through the book. "There's nothing in here about green mist either. It just says their singing made ponies do what they wanted."

"But why would they make ponies shout at each other?" Fluttershy asked. "That's not very nice."

Rainbow sighed. "Unfortunately, this is just a myth, which in

archaeological terms means 'incomplete history.' This book may not be telling the whole story or anything true at all. For all we know, this picture may just be a coincidence." She looked up at her friends. "But if they *are* the Sirens, why hasn't their singing affected us?"

"Applejack thinks it might have something to do with her rope and your bolt," Fluttershy said.

"And what about you?"

"I…I don't know. Applejack was just about to tell me when you came in."

They turned to Applejack, but she was too deep in thought to hear their last few sentences.

"Applejack?" Rainbow asked. "Do you know why Fluttershy…?"

"If those Sirens existed in the time of the Olympian gods," Applejack said, rubbing her chin, "then the gods must've dealt with 'em at some point."

"So? How does that help us? We're not the gods."

"No. But we can *ask* one of 'em how to defeat 'em."

"Oh, sure," Rainbow said, rolling her eyes. "And how are we supposed to do that? Call 'em on speed dial?"

Applejack walked past her. "I'll just summon Demeter."

Fluttershy and Rainbow gaped as Applejack went into the kitchen. They bolted after her.

"Excuse me?" Rainbow said. "Did you just say you were gonna *summon Demeter* ?"

"Yup," Applejack said, taking three apples from the fruit bowl.

" *The* Demeter. Goddess of the Harvest? A *goddess* ?!"

"There any other Demeter?" Applejack said, opening the pantry.

"Whoa, whoa, back up." Rainbow held up her hooves. "You know how to summon *Demeter* ?!"

"Yup."

" *How* ?"

"She told me," Applejack said nonchalantly, producing a loaf of break from the pantry.

Rainbow's jaw dropped. " *Demeter spoke to you* ?!"

"Yup," she said, opening a cupboard above.

"When?!"

"Not long after I first got the rope." Applejack pulled a basket-woven cornucopia out of the cupboard. "She told me how to call on her if I ever needed her guidance."

Rainbow blinked in disbelief. "But…I thought the gods had *retired* !"

"They have," the earth mare said as she gathered the apples and bread into the cornucopia. "They may not directly interfere in the mortal world anymore, but since I'm Demeter's Vassal, I wield a piece of her power, the same way you wield a piece of Zeus'. She can still make contact with the mortal world through me."

Rainbow bit her lip, astonished and envious that Applejack was in contact with Demeter. Meanwhile, Rainbow had been wielding Zeus' Lighting Bolt for months, and not *once* had the god actually spoken to her. Was there some Gods' Gift user manual she was supposed to read or something?

"So…we're going to meet a…a goddess?" Fluttershy said, her eyes wide in wonder.

"Sorry," Applejack said as she carried the cornucopia out of the kitchen. "But this is somethin' I halfta do alone. If she's gonna come, I'm gonna need complete silence, so no pony make any noise out here and keep outta my bedroom closet."

As she went into her bedroom, Rainbow muttered under her breath, "Sure, *she's* all buddy-buddy with *her* goddess! Zeus never told *me* about any summoning ritual. Didn't even pop into say, 'Hi, how are ya? Enjoying my bolt so far?'"

Fluttershy laid a hoof on her shoulder. "I'm sure there's a reason Zeus hasn't spoken to you yet, Dashie."

"Yeah," Rainbow said, shrugging off her hoof. "Maybe he's too chicken to tell me how disappointed he is in me."

Fluttershy was silent as Rainbow stomped over to the couch. She didn't know the words to comfort her.

Applejack, now dressed as Mistress Mare-velous, prepared her altar in the closet decorated in newspaper clippings. On the table was the cornucopia filled with the apples and the bread loaf, her rope surrounding it. On either side of the table were two torches bolted into the wall. As a precaution, there were no newspaper clippings hanging above them.

Striking a match, she lit both torches. Then she blew the match out, closed her eyes and knelt to the ground.

"Great and gracious Demeter," she murmured, "Goddess of the Harvest and Protector of the Fields, accept my offering and hear my prayer. I, your most loyal and obedient servant, beg that you come forth and give me the guidance I so desire."

She waited in silence. A minute passed, and then the rope began to glow around the cornucopia. Mare-velous did not flinch as she felt a breeze flow through her mane. Suddenly, everything around her was warm, and the room was filled with the smell of fresh wheat.

"Hello, my soldier."

Mare-velous opened her eyes. Stalks of wheat surrounded her, reaching as high as the sky. But that was not all that towered over her.

A tall green earth mare stood before her. A crown of wheat sat atop her brown mane, which was tied into a long, single braid down her shoulder. Her gown was made of fallen autumn leaves which flapped against the wind. She looked down at Mare-velous with chestnut brown eyes.

"My Lady Demeter," Mare-velous said, bowing her head.

Demeter lifted the hero's chin with her hoof. "Why do you call upon me, my champion?"

"My lady," Mare-velous said, lowering her gaze in respect, "I apologize for any disturbance I have brought, but we are facing a foe—well, *three* for that matter—who may have wreaked havoc during your reign."

She then explained all that had happened with the Dazzlings. The goddess listened to this news with a calm composure.

"These three mares you describe definitely sound like Poseidon's bastard sirens," Demeter said. "They have even share their names: Adagio, Aria and Sonata." She shook her head. "But it is also impossible, for Poseidon had stripped them of their singing voices eons ago, as punishment for their misdeeds."

"Well, they must've gotten 'em back somehow," Mare-velous said. "I heard 'em mention Circe."

"Circe?" Demeter closed her eyes with a sigh. "I should have known. That witch's island Aeanea is not far from where the Sirens used to dwell. If the Sirens had made a deal with Circe, it might explain their new abilities. Of course, dark curses are not my department, but it sounds like their new voices thrive off the negative energy produced by mortals when they argue, which might have been that green mist you saw. Circe might have given them those pony disguises as well."

"So the more ponies fight around them, the more powerful their voices become?"

The goddess nodded.

"So how is it that two of my friends and I aren't affected?"

"Ah, yes," Demeter said, looking down at her grimly. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that new friend of yours."

"If ya mean Rainbow Dash, sure she can be a lil' reckless sometimes, but she can be a lotta help when…"

"I'm not referring to Zeus' Vassal. I'm referring to *Discord's* Vassal."

Mare-velous raised her head. "Ya mean…Fluttershy?" Her expression became fearful. "Then…she's really…?"

"Yes," Demeter said. "That is why the three of you are unaffected by the Sirens' song. Your individual, personal connections with the gods protect you from any dark enchantment."

The hero shook her head. "No. No, no, Fluttershy *can't* be Discord's Vassal. Discord's not an Olympian god! Fluttershy doesn't have any talisman or object of Discord's!"

"A talisman is not always necessary for a god to bond with a mortal, nor is it limited to those who have thrones on Mount Olympus. When your friend Fluttershy found Discord and touched his amulet, he gave her a piece of his power and, in turn, bonded with her, making her his Vassal. She belongs to him as you belong to me and Rainbow Dash belongs to my brother. Whether or not she is aware of this connection, I do not know."

Mare-velous gulped. "It's true then. The statue at the museum really *is* Discord."

"Yes, and I'm afraid his connection with your friend has put her and the mortal realm in grave danger." The goddess bent down to her Vassal. "Applejack, you cannot undo what has already been done, but you can prevent what might happen. A part of Discord lives in Fluttershy, which means she has the power to release him from his stone prison."

Mare-velous' eyes widened.

"Applejack, it is imperative that you do what you can to keep

Fluttershy away from Discord so that he may never be released."

"I…" Mare-velous stammered. "I…I'll try, my lady."

"See that you do." Demeter straightened up. "Now, as for the Sirens…"

"Right." The hero had almost forgotten why she had summoned the goddess. "How do we defeat them?"

"It won't do to simply destroy them. Their spell will remain on the poor mortals. Their magic comes from their song, so a song must be sung to counteract theirs."

"So…we have to sing? What song?"

"It does not matter. As long as the three of you are singing together in harmony, you will be able to overpower the Sirens." Demeter sighed. "I do not approve of you working with Discord's Vassal, but you need three divine voices to defeat *their* three divine voices."

"Divine?" Mare-velous chuckled. "I sing okay, but I don't know about *divine* ."

The goddess smiled softly. "The three of you are blessed with our divine powers. When the three of you sing together with faith in your hearts for us, as well as faith for yourselves, you will be able to use those powers beyond your normal abilities. That's how we'll defeat them."

"Ya mean…if we sing…you, Zeus and…Discord, will be with us?"

Demeter lightly touched the hero's chin. "I'm *always* with you, Applejack, but this time, I'll be able to work *through* you." She cringed. "And yes, Zeus *and* Discord will be there too. At least a part of each of us will be. You'll see what I mean. But you have to sing the song when every pony who has been affected by the Sirens' spell is present, otherwise they will never be free."

"The competition! Every pony will be there! Or if not, they'll be watchin' it on TV!"

"Then you must sing the song then." Demeter stepped back. "Good luck, my champion. Or should I say, break a leg?"

As the goddess winked, the wind blew the wheat surrounding them. Mare-velous then opened her eyes and found herself back in her closet. The cornucopia on the table was empty.

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were reading magazines when Mistress Mare-velous came out of her room.

"That didn't take long," Rainbow said, putting down her magazine. "What'd the big gal say?"

Mare-velous then explained how to defeat the Sirens. Fluttershy looked horrified while Rainbow looked disgusted.

"Ya gotta be kidding me!" Rainbow said, throwing her hooves in the air. "We already defeated *one* villain by singing, now we gotta do that to defeat *three more* ?! No offense, Flutters."

"We're gonna have to sing?" Fluttershy said, shivering. "In front of all of Maretropolis?!"

"It's the only way," Mare-velous said. "Like Demeter said, three divine voices can overpower three other divine voices."

"Divine?" Rainbow said.

"You and I are Vassals to Zeus and Demeter. By singin' to the Sirens, we'll be usin' the powers Zeus and Demeter gave us."

"Yeah, but…what about Fluttershy? She's no vassal or soldier for any god."

"Well, she…" Mare-velous bit her lip as she looked nervously at her roommate. "She…" She sighed. "When you got your powers from Discord's amulet, it…it sort of protects you from any other dark magic."

"Really?" Fluttershy said, looking down at her hooves in wonder.

"Huh," Rainbow said. "Guess there's an advantage to being cursed by the God of Chaos."

"She's been blessed by a god," Mare-velous said. "Even if the cause *was* Discord, she has to sing with us if we're to defeat the Sirens."

"Okay. So what are we gonna sing?"

"Demeter said it doesn't matter, as long as we do it together."

"Then let's sing a rock ballad! If we're gonna be fighting with music *again* , we should at least make it something cool."

Mare-velous raised an eyebrow. "Thought ya didn't like karaoke."

"I said I didn't *do* karaoke. Not like I *can't* ."

"But we should really sing somethin' more soulful, like a country ballad. After all, it'd be easier if the three of us were singin' *on-key* ."

Rainbow scoffed. "Excuse me! But rock is not *off-key* !"

"It's not even singin'! It's just yellin' to music!"

"But country is *so slow* ! We'd bore the audience to death before we defeat the Sirens. Besides, the Sirens have been singing upbeat pop music. It's only logical that we sing something upbeat."

"Ya think country can't be upbeat?"

"We're doing rock!"

"Country!"

"Rock!"

"Country!"

"Rock!"

"Country!"

"STOP!"

Rainbow and Mare-velous turned to Fluttershy, who had stood up from the couch.

"I don't *care* what you sing!" Fluttershy said, tears welling up in her eyes. "There is no way that I'm going out there and singing in front of all those ponies!"

She raced out of the room.

"But Fluttershy, we need ya!" Rainbow called.

"I'm such an idiot," Mare-velous said, facehoofing herself. "I forgot all about her stage fright! Of *course* she wouldn't be up for this!"

"Whaddya mean stage fright? Why would she…? Oh." Rainbow cringed in realization. "That…explains a lot."

"What?"

"Okay, I should've read into this more, but," Rainbow said, rubbing the back of her neck, "back at Flight Camp, there was this talent show. Fluttershy was gonna sing. I'd come over to her house and hear her rehearse. But that was before…" She hung her head. "The day she was knocked out of the sky."

"Ah," Mare-velous said, nodding in understanding. "I take it that experience had changed more than just her temper tantrums."

"I mean she was always pretty timid, but I told ya, after that day she just shut every pony out. When the day of the talent show came, she walked onstage, but she just froze up. I never knew why. She had sung for me before, and I was right in the front row, supporting her. But I guess it wasn't sounding bad she was afraid of, it was…"

"Her fear of losin' control." Mare-velous sighed. "I ain't no psychoanalyst, but her fear of Saddle Rager might've manifested into a fear of performin' in front of others."

"MM?" Rainbow said, glancing sideways at her. "What you said about…Fluttershy being blessed with Discord's powers…is there…is there something more to that you're not telling us?"

Mare-velous winced and then turned to her. "You're her friend too, Rainbow, so ya must know. And ya work at the museum, so you can help me."

"What are you talking about?"

The earth mare took a deep breath. "Demeter told me that…the *real* reason Fluttershy's immune to the Sirens' magic is that…" She looked away. "Ya know how you carry a piece of Zeus and I carry a piece of Demeter?"

Rainbow tilted her head in concern. "What are you saying?"

Mare-velous closed her eyes. "It's the same with Fluttershy and… Discord."

Rainbow's eyes widened.

"The day Fluttershy received her powers," Mare-velous explained further, "was also the day she became Discord's Vassal, in the same way that I'm Demeter's and you're Zeus'."

Rainbow took a step back. "Then…that statue…at the museum…is really Discord?"

Mare-velous nodded. "I didn't know how to tell Fluttershy, but she is connected to Discord, and he is a dangerous god to be connected to. Demeter told me I had to keep her as far away from the statue as possible."

"It's worse than you think." The pegasus looked at her worriedly. "The statue, it's…it's cracking. It's been cracking for weeks now! I called Daring Do and she said there's some prophecy about him being set free by a pony, the Keeper of His Core." She glanced at Fluttershy's bedroom door. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. She was the one who found him, who was blessed by him, she visits him almost every day."

"Then this *is* worse than we thought," Mare-velous said, grabbing Rainbow's shoulders. "Dash, we *can't* let Fluttershy know about all this."

"Why? If she understood the danger…"

"Have you *met* Fluttershy? She could go right up to a rattlesnake and treat it like it's a lil' angel! If she knew she had the power to release Discord, a statue she's been *talkin'* to for *years* , what do ya think she'll do?"

Rainbow opened her mouth and then shut it.

"Exactly. We gotta make sure Fluttershy never gets close enough to Discord to let him out. I'm her roommate, and you work at the museum where the statue's kept. It's up to us to make sure Discord *stays* in stone. Agreed?"

With a gulp, Rainbow nodded. "Agreed." She stepped out of Mare-velous' hold and rubbed her foreleg awkwardly. "So, um…what's it like talking to a goddess?"

Mare-velous glanced up at the ceiling in thought. "Like…talkin' to your favorite teacher. A teacher ya respect and fear at the same time."

The pegasus' ears drooped. "Must be nice…being able to call on your patron goddess whenever you want."

Noticing her distress, Mare-velous lay a hoof on her friend's shoulder. "I know that…ya've heard nothin' from Zeus since ya got the lightning bolt, but ya shouldn't feel bad about it."

"But why *hasn't* he spoken to me yet? Like you said, it's not like those gods are doing anything else." She looked upwards. "Is he… afraid or…embarrassed to see me?"

Mare-velous shook her head. "He wouldn't be embarrassed if he'd chosen you to wield his weapon."

"Well what if I *made* him embarrassed?" Rainbow turned to her. "After all, I…I can be clumsy sometimes and…" She touched the bolt around her neck. "I'd be *less* clumsy if the big guy'd just show up and tell me how this worked! Demeter couldn't *wait* to start mentoring *you* !"

"Rainbow, I think…"

"Just forget it." Rainbow shrugged off her hoof and walked towards the door. "It's late. I should…probably get some rest for tomorrow's battle of the bands." She looked over her shoulder. "Think Zeus'll appear in my dreams like some animal spirit guide or something?"

"Rainbow, you should know…"

"Yeah, you're right." She opened the door. "He's probably busy courting some mortals as a goose or something."

She shut the door before Mare-velous could stop her.

Sonata stared at the strange slop of food that had been placed in her hoof. "What *is* this?"

Pinkie Pie snorted. "It's a taco, silly!"

It was evening, and Sonata and Pinkie were standing at a taco stand in Maretropolis Park. The pink mare was chomping on her taco, not minding that cheese sauce was dripping down her chin.

"You mortals actually *eat* this stuff?" Sonata asked.

"Mmm-hmm," Pinkie said, swallowing. "Ya mean they don't have tacos where you come from?"

"Eh, we usually ate seaweed or shellfish. That was when we lived underwater, before we started feeding off mortals' negative energy."

"Ah, that makes sense," Pinkie said, unfazed.

Sonata smirked. "It's *so* much easier to be honest when your date is brainwashed."

"Ya gonna eat that or what?"

The siren gulped as she stared at the messy taco shell. Closing her eyes, she brought the taco to her open mouth and bit down on it.

Her eyes popped open and she gobbled down the rest of it.

"Mmm!" she said with her mouth full. " *Dis ish duh bust ding uh evuh daystud!* "

" *Ay-huh!* " Pinkie said, her mouth also full. " *I-nymph in?* "

They swallowed simultaneously and laughed.

"I must have more!" Sonata said, slamming her hooves on the counter of the taco stand. "Gimme all the tacos you got!"

"Okay," the stallion said with a smile as he picked up the condiments. "It's on the house!"

"Sweet!" Pinkie said. "Who knew going out with an evil singing siren would be so beneficial?"

"Told ya it'd be fun," Sonata said. "Ooh, what's that over there?!"

Pinkie looked to where Sonata was pointing. "Oh, that's a fountain."

"Water!" She raced off. "Wait for the tacos, will ya?"

"Okay, have fun!" Pinkie shouted, waving.

Sonata dove into the park's fountain and started splashing around.

"Oh, sweet!" Sonata said, picking up some coins. "Free money!"

She continued swimming around, collecting more coins until a police officer came over.

"Hey, no swimming in the fountain!" he said, raising his matchstick. "And taking coins out of a fountain is stealing!"

Sonata's head came out of the water. "Oh, but officer," she said, batting her eyelashes, "I'm just a sweet innocent little girl. I didn't know any better."

The cop rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, tell that to the judge."

Smirking, Sonata opened her mouth and sang a few "ahs." The

officer dropped his matchstick and stood there mesmerized.

"Do you still wanna arrest me?" Sonata asked, curling her lip into a pout.

The cop smiled. "So sorry to bother you, miss. Enjoy your swim."

He turned around and walked away, forgetting his matchstick. By this time, Pinkie had arrived, carrying a tower of tacos.

"Not to be a mother hen," Pinkie said, peering around the tacos, "but if ya eat while swimming, you're likely to cramp up."

Sonata snorted. "That's ridiculous. I eat while swimming *all* the time and that *never* happens!"

"Maybe when you were a sea pony, but now you're a land pony. And the laws of physics state that if you're changed into a land pony, you're more likely to cramp up if ya go swimming while eating."

"Well what if I just sit here and not swim anywhere?"

Pinkie shrugged. "That might work."

She lowered herself and placed down the pile of tacos so she could sit beside Sonata. They each took a taco from the bottom of the pile, amazingly without having the whole thing fall over.

"I've been talking a lot about myself," Sonata said as she bit into her taco. "Tell me about you."

"Whaddya wanna know?" Pinkie asked.

The siren propped her elbow on the rim of the fountain and leaned her chin on her hoof. "Absolutely *everything* !"

"Well, I was born on a rock farm with my three sisters Limestone Pie, Maud Pie and Marble Pie. Marble's my baby sister by only a few minutes but Maud is really my closest…"

As she went on, the two of them slowly devoured the tower of tacos. Sonata did not say a word, as she was watching and listening to the

bespectacled mare with interest.

"And that's pretty much the story of my entire life!" Pinkie said as she swallowed the last taco. "That is, up to the point where you called me and asked to hang out. But you know everything after that."

"That's amazing," Sonata said. "Living a double-life as a rock farmer and superhero. Also explains how you were able to get to my apartment so fast."

"Yeah," Pinkie said with a sigh. "But I really wanna be closer to Maretropolis so I can do the superhero stuff more often, but Dad doesn't really want me to leave the rock farm. He says I should stay with my family."

"So you have daddy issues." The siren looked up at the starry sky. "I know how that feels."

"What? Did your dad not want you to be an evil siren or something?"

"That must've been it. I mean first he left our mom high and wet with three fish eggs, for the stupid reason that he had to go back to his wife; then for years he doesn't bother to visit, not even during the holidays; nor did he show up for Mom's funeral. He never sent a card! And it's not until after we sink a few hundred ships that he *finally* shows up, and it's to take our voices away!" She sighed. "At least *your* dad was around to make you feel loved and adored."

Pinkie nodded. "That's tough. No wonder you and your sisters are taking over the world."

Sonata smiled. "I *knew* you'd understand."

An hour later, Pinkie and Sonata were walking down the hallway to the Dazzlings' apartment. The two of them were laughing.

"Your sister got her head stuck in *what* ?!" Pinkie exclaimed.

"A *soda bottle* !" Sonata said, bawling. "Poor Aria's head was swollen for *weeks* !"

"Guess we mortals really *shouldn't* litter, huh?"

"You really shouldn't! Maybe Aria would hate all you mortals a little *less* !"

They laughed again. Sonata grinned as she rubbed her foreleg.

"Thanks for walking me back to my apartment," she said. "You didn't have to. I don't get lost anymore."

"What kind of date would I be if I didn't?" Pinkie asked.

Sonata frowned. "Hey, um…Pinkie…do you think…you know, if you weren't…?"

She paused when she caught Pinkie's perpetually excited expression. It hadn't changed all night.

Sonata shook her head. "Never mind."

They made it to Sonata's apartment door.

"Want me to come in?" Pinkie asked.

"No, no, no," Sonata said, turning to her. "My sisters are home and they don't really want me fooling around with any mortals until *after* we take over the world. But don't worry!" She grabbed Pinkie's shoulder. "Once we take over the world, we can fool around all we want!"

"Sounds like fun, bye!" Pinkie said, turning to leave.

"Call me tomorrow!" Sonata called, waving.

"I'll call the minute I get up!"

Giggling, Sonata opened the door. She frowned when she saw Adagio and Aria waiting on the couch. Their hooves were folded over their chests and their eyes were glaring.

"Where have you been?" Adagio demanded. "We're supposed to be resting our voices for tomorrow's performance!"

"Chillax, will ya?" Sonata said, shutting the door. "I was just getting some air."

"Uh-huh," Aria said. "With whom?"

"Just this mare who'd given me her number at that karaoke thing. Remember, she was the one wearing my face today?" She squealed. "She showed me a *taco cart* ! You girls ever tried a taco? It's *amazing* !"

Adagio slapped herself in the forehead. "What did I say about fooling around with mortals? We're in the middle of a grandmaster plan to take over the mortal word here! We can't afford any distractions!"

Sonata huffed. "I was *not* fooling around!" She went over to the kitchen counter and hoisted herself onto it. "It was just one little *date* !" She folded her hooves. "We didn't even kiss."

"Then what *did* you do?" Aria asked.

"We just…you know, walked around town, ate some tacos, swam in the fountain and just…talked." She grinned. "Pinkie is a *very* good listener."

"Uh, *hello* ?" Aria said, rolling her eyes. "She's under a spell! Of *course* she's a good listener!"

"Oh but she was also so *weird* ! Like…the *good* kind of weird." She put her hooves together. "Please, please, *please,* can I keep her?"

"We don't have time for this!" Adagio said, rising from the sofa. "We need to find a way to take care of that meddling Soldier of Demeter's."

"What's the point?" Aria said. "It's not like she can even get close to us without getting mobbed by our adoring fans."

"That doesn't mean she won't *try* ." Adagio began pacing. "If only we knew more about this hero, where she lives, who her friends are…"

"Maybe my new girlfriend can help," Sonata piped.

Adagio groaned. "If I hear you talk about your *girlfriend* one more time…"

"No, I'm serious! I mean she's in this whole club of heroes thing called the Power Ponies. One hero can shoot lasers from her horn and one of 'em has this magical lasso that…"

The eldest sister stopped. "What did you say?"

"I said one of 'em shoots lasers and…"

"No, no, no. The one with the lasso."

"Oh, yeah. She has a lasso and these horseshoes which she throws around. She's called Mistress Mare-velous and Pinkie says she can be a *real* grump."

"Really?" Adagio smiled maliciously. "What *else* did your girlfriend say about this…Mistress Mare-velous?"

Fluttershy was standing on a stage, a microphone in front of her. She looked out at the audience of ponies and saw that it stretched on for miles. She couldn't even see the back of the theater.

" *And now,* " said a voice, " *the musical stylings of Fluttershy Buttercream, who will be singing a song to defeat the evil Sirens and save the world!* "

She was blinded by a spotlight, and her knees grew weak. Crickets chirped and some pony coughed. Fluttershy opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Suddenly, there were screams. Fluttershy glanced around to see what was going on, but the spotlight prevented her from seeing anything. Then she looked down at herself and found that the muscles in her legs had enlarged.

"No," she said in a deep, gruff voice as she backed away. "No, no!" She yelped as her heavy weight caused her to fall through the stage. "This isn't me!" She covered her eyes. "No!"

As she scrunched herself into a ball, the screams started to fade away and she felt something cold but soft touch her back. She did not flinch, for she knew the touch well.

" *I'm here, my darling* ," said a male voice. " *You don't have to be afraid anymore.* "

Without opening her eyes, Fluttershy wrapped her hooves around the warm, furry body. She felt lighter now and more like herself. As the creature's claw ran through her mane, she cried softly into his fur.

" *That's it* ," he said. " *Let it all out.* "

She sniffed. "I…I still can't understand how…how you can be here."

His paw moved gently down her back. " *I feel your distress and I come. I am just strong enough to be able to reach out to you subconsciously and visit you in your dreams.* " His voice sounded sad. " *I wish I could do more.* "

"It's all I need," Fluttershy said, clutching his fur.

" *But tell me, my darling. What has you so distressed?* "

She opened her eyes. All she could see was a white void.

"I…I'm supposed to sing tomorrow," Fluttershy said. "In front of millions of ponies."

" *Sing?* " he said, surprised. " *You can* sing *?* "

She hung her head. "I'm not very good."

" *Now I doubt* that." She closed her eyes as he cupped her chin in his claw. " *Your speaking voice is so sweet, I'm certain your singing voice is* angelic."

She smiled softly. "But the thing is…I have stage fright." She moved her face out of his hold. "It's not that I'm worried about sounding bad or anything, it's just that…" She gulped. "Whenever…whenever I go up and…so many ponies are watching, I…I'm afraid that…they'll see

me. The *real* me." She dropped her head into his fur. "Every part of me."

There was silence. " *And what's wrong with that?* "

She inhaled sharply as his claw began stroking her face. It felt so cold, but comforting at the same time.

" *I cannot see anything while I'm in stone* ," he said. " *I can't even see while in your dreams. But whenever I hear your sweet voice, do you know what I see?* "

"What?"

He lifted her face up and Fluttershy opened her eyes. She could not see his face, only a tall brown body that faded into the void.

" *I see the most remarkable creature in the universe. One who is kind, compassionate, and whose voice pierces through the darkness like a shining beacon. When those ponies hear you sing,* that *is what they will see.* " He gently ran his paw through her mane. " *Besides, it's not as if the fate of the world rests on you singing.* "

She bit her lip. "Actually, it…kind of does."

He was quiet for a moment. " *Well, um…you still shouldn't worry. Even if I'm in stone,* " she could hear the soft whisper in her ear, " *I will be with you. They can take my statue to the edge of the world, but my heart and spirit will never leave you.* " He pulled her closer. " *Remember that when you sing tomorrow. Sing for* me *, because I know that anything that comes out of your mouth will be beautiful.* "

Fluttershy sat up in bed. Her dream had given her an idea. Opening her side table drawer, she pulled out a yellow notebook with a pink butterfly on it. After grabbing a pen, she started writing.

In the morning, Fluttershy and Applejack were at the breakfast table. Applejack was reading Fluttershy's notebook. After a while, Applejack looked up at her roommate.

"Where'd ya come up with this?" she asked.

"It, um…came to me in a…dream." Fluttershy blushed. "W-What do you think?"

Applejack set down the notebook. "I think we just found our song to defeat the Sirens."

Before you berate Pinkie for being a blabbermouth, remember that she is under a spell.

The Sirens' Song: Part 3

" *Never explain—your friends do not need it and your enemies will not believe you anyway."*

- Elbert Hubbard

"Shoot," Applejack said as they waited in line to get into the stadium. "I almost forgot. Twilight's pretty much blacklisted me! Pinkie won't want me workin' the stand either!" She looked down at the badge around her neck. "My vendor's pass is probably no good anymore."

"I figured as much," Rainbow Dash said. "Which is why we're going in the old-fashioned way."

"What's that?"

Rainbow held up three tickets. " *Duh* !"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Still, I bet those guards have a picture of me. Don't forget Twilight knows my secret identity and wouldn't let Mistress Mare-velous *or* Applejack Smith in!"

"Thought of that too. Here." She produced a pair of glasses out of her jacket pocket and handed them to Applejack. "Take my spares."

The earth mare raised an eyebrow as she put the spectacles on. "No way this'll work."

"Why not? Works for me all the time." Rainbow tilted her head. "Though ya might wanna lose the hat. It's a real telltale sign."

"My rope's in here," Applejack whispered, touching her hat.

"Then we gotta hide it somehow."

"Whaddya suggest?"

When the three heroes reached the front of the line, Rainbow smiled as she handed the tickets to the ticket taker. As he ripped off the stubs, he looked Applejack over.

"Enjoy the show," he said, handing the stubs back. "And congratulations."

Applejack forced a smile as she patted the belly bump beneath her beige trench coat. As soon as they were out of the ticket taker's hearing, she narrowed her eyes at Rainbow, who had a smug look on her face.

"Told ya it'd work," she said.

"I can't believe it," Applejack said, shaking her head.

But she couldn't help smiling to herself. It *was* a pretty good plan, albeit ridiculous.

"So how are we going to do this?" Fluttershy asked. "I mean we can't just walk onstage and sing."

"Got that covered," Rainbow said, waving a hoof. "I got in touch with one of the sound ponies, Vinyl Scratch. She agreed to set up some equipment so we can sing over the Sirens during their song."

"How'd ya manage to do that?" Applejack asked.

"Vinyl was the only one on the crew not under the Sirens' spell, so she was more than happy to help. Plus we went to Maretropolis U together."

"Why *isn't* she under their spell?" Fluttershy asked.

Rainbow smirked. "She never takes off her headphones. Come on, she said she'd meet us in the sound booth."

Fluttershy looked out at the stadium and saw how many ponies were in the stands. The sight made her slow her pace. Applejack turned back to her.

"Ya comin', Sugar Cube?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "Y-You girls go ahead. I have to, uh…" She spotted the mares' restroom. "Powder my muzzle!"

As she whizzed into the bathroom, Applejack and Rainbow glanced at each other.

"We'll meet up with ya later," the former said, following after her roommate.

When Applejack opened the bathroom door, she heard hyperventilating. She pulled her hat out of her coat and placed in on her head so she could feel more like herself. Peering around the corner, she saw Fluttershy staring into the mirror and gripping the sink.

"Who am I kidding?" she said, hanging her head. "I can't do this!"

"Sure you can."

Fluttershy spun around as Applejack approached her.

"Ya sounded great when we were practicin' together," the earth mare said.

"But that's when it was just you two," Fluttershy said, looking away, ashamed. "I don't know if I can sing in front of all those ponies."

"Hey," Applejack said, placing her hooves on her shoulders. "Remember why we're here. If we don't do this, our friends and all of Maretropolis will be under the Sirens' influence forever. We'll beat 'em if we work together, I know it."

"Is that so?"

Upon hearing Adagio's voice, Applejack turned to see her and Aria in the doorway wearing smug expressions.

"Somehow we knew you'd come back for more, Mistress Mare-velous," Adagio said.

Applejack was silent.

"Oh, yes," Adagio said as she began circling the two heroes. "We recognize you. It wasn't hard figuring out that cowgirl who ran out of the bathroom and the masked mare who tied us up a few minutes later were one in the same."

"Same coat color, same eyes, same mane," Aria said as she joined her sister in the circling, "not to mention those lame glasses don't work."

Applejack took off the glasses and tucked them into her coat. "So whaddya gonna do? Call your brainwashed minions to throw me out? Tell every pony my real identity?"

"No need," Adagio said. "We've already ruined your reputation. What would be the point of spilling your biggest secret?"

"It's not like you can defeat us either way," Aria said.

"Even *trying* to attack us again will only make the mortals of Maretropolis hate you *more* ."

Applejack crossed her forelegs. "Y'all seem pretty confident about that."

"We're merely stating the facts. You think we're afraid of Demeter's little rope?" Adagio scoffed. "Demeter's not even *remotely* that powerful."

"Nothing but a flower-picker whose secret weapon is *honesty* ," Aria said in a snarky tone.

"Now, if your patron god were Daddy Poseidon…"

"…or Apollo, who's all about the music…"

"…heck, even Dionysus would be better suited for this situation." Adagio smirked at Applejack. "The Goddess of *Plants* is *nothing* against three sea sirens."

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "Ya better hope Demeter didn't hear ya say that. Or did ya forget she can literally put ya on ice?"

Adagio laughed. "If any of the gods still had *any* power in this world, they would've done something about us already."

"Besides," Aria said, "it's *you* we're fighting, not Demeter."

"Really, Applejack, how can you expect to defeat *us* when you couldn't even defeat your parents' murderer?"

Applejack's and Fluttershy's eyes widened in shock.

"Oh, yes," Adagio said with a dark chuckle. "We know *all* about your dear old Mummy and Daddy. I'll bet if they were alive," she stuck her face in Applejack's, "they'd be severely disappointed in how poor a hero their daughter turned out to be."

Applejack clenched her hoof. "At least *my* pa wouldn't be disappointed enough to *steal my singin' voice* ."

Adagio stepped back, surprised at her comeback. She growled at the cowgirl.

"Enjoy the show," she said, turning her back to her. "It might be your last."

Aria followed her sister out of the bathroom. Fluttershy was still hiding behind Applejack. The pegasus looked up at her roommate, whose cheeks were red with fury.

"Applejack, I…" Fluttershy said. "I'm so sorry."

"Why should *you* be sorry?" Applejack asked, looking down at her.

"Well, those Sirens…what they said to you…it was…just *awful* ."

The earth mare shrugged. "Yeah, well, they can go buck themselves."

Fluttershy blinked. "You're…not upset?"

"Oh, I'm downright *furious* . But it's gonna take a lot more than that to bring me down. If I can go to the Underworld and back, I can handle a few harsh words."

The pegasus tilted her head. "You've been to the Underworld?"

"Long story," Applejack said, waving her hoof. "Besides, *I* know they're spoutin' hooey, *you* know they're spoutin' hooey, *Demeter* knows they're spoutin' hooey. That's all that matters."

Fluttershy glanced at her reflection in thought. "So…what you're saying is…it doesn't matter what a bunch of strangers think, all that matters is what the ones you care about think…and what you think of yourself?"

Applejack tapped her chin. "Yeah, I guess that's what I'm sayin'."

Fluttershy remembered the words from her dreams: *I know that anything that comes out of your mouth will be beautiful.*

She blushed. "He may be right."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "He?"

Fluttershy turned to her. She didn't feel like there was any need to keep anything from her roommate, as Applejack already knew the source of her power.

"Y-You know?" Fluttershy said. "When you told me that…my powers from Discord protected me from the Sirens' magic…I…I wasn't surprised. I mean…I already know he wants to protect me. For all I know, that's why he gave me my powers in the first place. After all, when I first saw him, I told him about what had happened at Flight Camp, he may have wanted to give me the opportunity to defend myself and…"

"Sugar, whaddya talkin' about?" Applejack asked in a concerned voice.

Fluttershy gripped the edge of the sink. "I…I've been dreaming of Discord."

Applejack took a step back.

"Not nightmares, no! In fact…he shows up whenever I'm dreaming of something scary and he makes it all better." She smiled softly.

"It's…comforting, actually, knowing that someone's looking out for me." She looked at Applejack. "That's what inspired me to write the song. If not for Discord, I wouldn't be what I am today. I…I wouldn't feel stronger, greater, like…like I can do anything." She put her hoof to her heart. "It's like having my own guardian angel."

This revelation induced fear in Applejack. She had thought Fluttershy had been completely unaware of her connection with Discord, but it seemed…he had already reached out to her. Discord was the most dangerous entity to ever exist, the one who had cursed Fluttershy in the first place, and she was speaking of him as if he were a guardian angel.

What other lies had Discord told her?

Applejack wanted to remind her of why Discord had been imprisoned in the first place, to give her Demeter's warning that if Fluttershy wasn't careful, she could unleash hell upon the world.

Then the earth mare saw the expression on her roommate's face. It was so hopeful, so confident. As evil as he was, Discord had induced that confidence in her. Applejack couldn't take that away, not when she needed Fluttershy to go out there and face her fears.

Taking a deep breath, Applejack said, "I…feel the same way about Demeter. But…in all honesty," she laid her hooves on Fluttershy's shoulders, "all she did was give me a rope. *She* wasn't the one who told me to defend the world. *She* wasn't the one who sent me to Maretropolis. *She* wasn't the one who had me join the Power Ponies. That was all *me* ."

She gently lifted Fluttershy's chin. "Havin' faith in a higher power sure can help sometimes, but ya also gotta have faith in your own abilities. Discord may have set ya on the path, but *you* were the one who took yourself the rest of the way. *That's* why I believe you can do this."

Grinning, Fluttershy nodded in determination. "You're right, Applejack. I *can* do this. Now let's go…whoop those Sirens' butts!"

She marched bravely towards the bathroom door. Applejack smiled

at her confidence, but then frowned when she remembered where it was coming from.

"Fluttershy."

The pegasus turned. Applejack bit her lip as she struggled to find the right words.

"Promise…that no matter *how* confident ya are in yourself…you won't do anything stupid, will ya?"

"Don't worry, Applejack," Fluttershy said. "I don't think anything could make me *that* confident. Not even a god."

As they exited the bathroom, Applejack murmured, "I sure hope so."

The door to the sound booth was opened by a white unicorn mare with electric blue hair. Covering her eyes were tinted purple sunglasses and on her head was a set of headphones. She grinned when she saw Rainbow Dash.

"Come on in, Crash," she said, opening the door further.

Rainbow laughed awkwardly. "Please don't use my old college nickname, Scratch."

"Hey, Vinyl!" the mare at the lighting board called. "We're not supposed to have visitors!"

Vinyl put her hoof around Dash. "Rainbow Crash here is an intern from Maretropolis U, majoring in Sound Design. I said she could come here and learn a thing or two."

The other crew members shrugged and returned to their work.

"But if you wanna make yourself useful," Vinyl whispered to Rainbow, "you can go grab some extension cords from the supply closet. They're long and…"

"I know what extension cords look like," Rainbow said, brushing her

off.

She went over to the supply closet and opened the door. What she saw made her eyes bulge out of their sockets. Sonata and Pinkie Pie turned to the pegasus in the doorway. The two of them were locked in a tight embrace, their lower legs entwined, Pinkie's glasses hanging from Sonata's tangled ponytail.

"Hi!" they piped, apparently undisturbed by Rainbow's interruption.

"Urg…" Rainbow uttered.

"Whoopsies!" Sonata said with a giggle. "I think we might've mentally scarred her for life!"

"Did ya need something, Dashie?" Pinkie asked.

"Uh…uh…"

Vinyl poked her head in. "Extension cords."

Without untangling from Sonata, Pinkie reached for the shelf behind her and grabbed a roll of extension cord.

"Here you go!" she said, handing it to Rainbow.

Rainbow was still too shocked to move, so Vinyl took the roll.

"Sorry, but you two are gonna have to leave," the unicorn said. "The show's gonna start soon and we can't afford any…distractions."

"Oh, yeah?" Sonata said.

She opened her mouth but Pinkie quickly covered it. "Come on, Sonny Doo. Let 'em do their job. Besides, you're gonna have to rest your adorable voice for the show. This is your chance to take over the world, remember?"

Sonata moaned. " *Fine* !" She grunted as she pried her legs free from Pinkie's. "But we're continuing this *after* the show."

"Okie dokie lokie!"

Sonata pushed Rainbow and Vinyl aside while Pinkie bounced after her. Once they were out of the sound booth, Vinyl turned to Rainbow.

"Sorry, had no idea they were in there. I can barely hear anything with these babies on." Rainbow said nothing. "Dash?" She waved her hoof over the pegasus' wide eyes. "Dash?"

Tapping her chin, Vinyl came up with an idea. Reluctantly, she took off her headphones and placed them over Rainbow's ears. Dash cried out as loud dubstep music blared in her ears! She hastened the headphones off her head.

"How do you listen to that stuff *all the time* ?!"

Vinyl shrugged as she picked up her headphones and put them back on. "Saved me from being brainwashed, didn't it?"

There was a knock at the hallway door. Vinyl opened it to find Applejack and Fluttershy standing there.

"Hi, we're friends of Rainbow Dash?" Applejack said.

"Of course," Vinyl said. "She's right here, though…" She chuckled. "Not *all* here."

"Did I just see Pinkie Pie with one of the Sirens?"

Rainbow nodded dumbly.

"What was Pinkie doing with her?" Fluttershy asked.

"Trust me," Rainbow said, shaking her head and holding up her hoof. "You don't wanna know."

While the competition was in the middle of its third act, Vinyl Scratch helped the three heroes set up their act on a catwalk facing the stage. Vinyl had hooked up a pair of speakers to the sound booth with the roll of extension cord. She had plugged in three microphones for the heroes, who were now dressed in their

costumes and holding those mics.

"Ya sure ya can trust this mare not to reveal our secret identities?" Mare-velous whispered to Zapp.

"Oh, sure," Zapp said. "We sealed our secret with the Zeta Nu Sigma secret hoofshake. She's bound by the sacred bonds of Zeta Sisterhood not to say anything."

Mare-velous snorted. " *You* were part of a *sorority* ?!"

Zapp rolled her eyes. "I'll have ya know that Zeta Nu Sigma's the more *chill* kinda sorority. We don't waste time gussying up like *most* sororities." She tilted her head towards the unicorn. "Vinyl was a year ahead of me. When I realized that she was part of the sound crew *and* protected by her headphones, I knew our college ties would come in handy."

Mare-velous grinned at Zapp. "I've figured it out."

She turned to her. "Figured out what?"

The earth mare set down her mic. "Why Zeus hasn't given ya any guidance yet."

Zapp's eyes wandered as she tried to think of what she meant. "I'm a sorority girl?"

Chuckling, Mare-velous shook her head. "I don't think he needs ta."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Zapp," Mare-velous said, pointing to herself. "When Demeter first spoke to me, I'd just lost my parents. While I still had my granny and siblings and all, I had no pony to tell me how to control these new powers of mine. Demeter came to me because I was a lost filly who needed help."

She placed her hoof on Zapp's shoulder. "When *you* first became Zapp, *I* was there to help ya control the storm. Even after that, ya had Matter-Horn, Daring Do, lots of ponies who have been teachin' ya how to be a hero and how to use your powers. *I* didn't have all

that.

"Ya say ya need Zeus to tell ya what to do, but look at all the stuff ya've been able to do without his help! Ya've faced bad guys, took down the Shadow King, heck," she said, gesturing towards Vinyl, "you were the one who got us into this place without a hitch! Don't ya see? Zeus hasn't offered his help yet, because he knows ya don't need it, because," she gave Zapp's shoulder a gentle squeeze, "he's proud of what ya can do on your own."

Zapp stared at Mare-velous in wonder. Then her lips slowly curled into a smile.

"T-Thanks, MM." She wiped away a tear before any pony could see it. "I…I didn't realize…how much I need to hear that."

"But who knows?" the earth mare said, retracting her hoof. "Maybe someday you'll mess up so bad, the big guy'll *have* to show up."

"Hey!"

Mare-velous laughed, earning a light punch in the shoulder from Zapp, who was also laughing. Saddle Rager grinned, amazed at how much their relationship had changed in a matter of a few minutes.

"It's good to see that the two of you are friends now," Saddle Rager said. "Now I'm really confident this song is going to…"

She squealed as she was suddenly knocked over by a pink blur. Zapp dropped her mic as she and Mare-velous turned to the left side of the catwalk. Radiance stood there, and Fili-Second zipped up to her side. They were glaring at Zapp, Mare-velous and Saddle Rager angrily.

"Fili, what's the big idea?" Zapp said.

"I'll tell you what the *big idea* is."

Upon hearing the Matter-Horn's voice, Mare-velous and Zapp turned to their right. Humdrum was waddling up to them, pounding a fist into his claw. The Masked Matter-Horn hovered above him.

"The *big idea* ," the Matter-Horn said, "is that I made it *explicitly clear* that I didn't want you disrupting this event, *Mare-velous* . But now I see that you've turned two more of our team members against me."

"Twilight, stop," Mare-velous said, reaching for a horseshoe. "You're not yourself."

"Takes one to know one!" Fili-Second cried.

"We hate to have to do this, girls," the Matter-Horn said, "but it's our job to protect the city from evildoers."

Spike cried out in fury as he leapt at Zapp. She easily dodged him by stepping to the side. Even so, it gave Radiance and Fili-Second reason to charge. Fili, of course, got to the clear-headed heroes sooner. Zapp quickly flew upward, but Saddle Rager was knocked over again.

"We're not seriously gonna have to fight our own teammates, are we?" Zapp asked.

"We just gotta incapacitate 'em long enough to sing!" Mare-velous said. "I got Matter-Horn!"

She launched a horseshoe towards the Matter-Horn. She melted it down with a heat ray.

"Hey!" Mare-velous shouted as a golden blob dropped onto the catwalk. "Ya owe me a new horseshoe!"

She yelped as the alicorn shot an ice beam at her hoof. Mare-velous retreated as the Matter-Horn chased after her. Meanwhile, Radiance was closing in on Saddle Rager.

"I half expected this sort of behavior from Mistress Mare-velous and Zapp," the unicorn said, scowling, "but *you* Saddle Rager! It's like you're that awful monster all the time now!"

Saddle Rager was crouched on the floor, her hooves over her head. "Please don't make me get mad at you!"

Radiance used her bracelets to summon a net. Before she could

snare Saddle Rager, however, Humdrum jumped at the pegasus and got caught in the net instead.

"Humdrum!" Radiance shouted.

"Oops," the dragon said, smiling awkwardly.

The unicorn facehoofed herself. "Must you *always* get in the way?!"

Fili-Second was zooming circles around Zapp, making her quite dizzy.

"Fili, stop it!" Zapp shouted. "The Sirens—ow!" She cried out as Fili-Second slapped her every time she went round. "Are…not…what…they…seem!"

"Liar!" Fili-Second said, pinning her to the ground. "You just want my Sonny Doo all to yourself!"

Using her hips, Zapp bucked the pink mare off. She flipped over so she could pin Fili-Second down.

"She's *using* you, Pinkie!" Zapp yelled. "She doesn't really love you!"

"Yeah, she does!" Fili-Second said, zipping out from under Zapp's hold. Then she started rapidly punching Zapp in the face. "She loves me *and* tacos!"

Mare-velous found it hard to concentrate on her lasso with the Matter-Horn zapping at her every few seconds.

"You *would* start a schism, Smith!" the alicorn shouted with another ice beam. "You *always* wanted to be the leader!"

"I won't deny that the thought may have crossed my mind at one point!" Mare-velous called over her shoulder.

It was clearly the wrong thing to say. The Matter-Horn charged at her, tackling her to the floor.

As the fight went on, all six Power Ponies, plus Humdrum, started glowing green. Mist emitted from their bodies and floated over

towards the stage. The Dazzlings were watching the scene from backstage.

"What I tell you, girls?" Adagio said, grinning in satisfaction. "Turning those heroes against each other was *genius* . Soon we'll absorb their powers, *including* Demeter's!" She turned to her youngest sister. "Can't believe I'm saying this, but…good job, Sonata, for getting that information out of your girlfriend."

"I just hope my Pinkie Poo doesn't get hurt," Sonata said, sounding genuinely worried.

"She'll be fine," Aria said, rolling her eyes. "She's super-fast, remember?"

Adagio inhaled deeply as the green mist transferred into her amulet. Aria and Sonata did the same.

"Ah," Adagio breathed. "Yes. Just the boost we needed. Who knew we'd end up getting a little *Olympian* magic out of this?"

Suddenly, she stiffened.

"What is it?" Aria asked.

Adagio touched her pendant. "Something's…off."

Sonata looked down at her own pendant. "I don't feel anything weird. Except maybe a little gas."

"No, that's not it." Her hooves tightened around the gem. "Some of that magic's Gracian, but it's not…Olympian. It almost feels…"

She trailed off when the audience applauded for the singing group onstage. Adagio shook her head.

"Never mind." She put her hooves around the other two. "This is our moment, sisters. Soon the whole mortal world will be under our control, and then dear old Daddy will be sorry that he *ever* ignored us."

"Think he'll come next Winter Solstice?" Sonata asked excitedly.

Aria groaned. "They don't celebrate Winter Solstice anymore, Sonata. They celebrate Hearth's Warming now."

Sonata huffed. "Still. Think he'll come?"

"After today," Adagio said as she led them onstage, "he'll come whenever we want him to."

The music started and the Dazzlings walked out onstage. As they sang, they bathed in the green mist coming from the battle on the catwalk. The audience was transfixed.

Upon hearing the Sirens' singing, Saddle Rager looked around at her teammates as she dodged Radiance's pink mallet. Only now did she notice the green mist.

"Zapp, Mare-velous!" Saddle Rager said, jumping out of Radiance's blow. "We have to stop fighting them! The Sirens are feeding off the negative energy we're all creating!"

"What?" Zapp said, looking down at herself while Fili punched her again. "Ow!"

"But we're not," Mare-velous said, sliding away from the Matter-Horn's ice beam, "under their spell!"

"I don't think it matters," Saddle Rager shouted as she attempted to shake Humdrum off her leg, "as long as we're fighting around them!"

"But we can't—ow!" Zapp said. "Stop 'em!"

"I have an idea," Mare-velous said, psychically spinning her lasso into the air. "Try and get 'em all in one place!"

Having successfully thrown Humdrum off her leg, Saddle Rager broke into a run towards where Mare-velous and Matter-Horn were battling. "Bet you can't catch me!"

Radiance and Humdrum angrily ran after her.

"Hey, Fili!" Zapp shouted, pointing to the stage. "Your Sonny Doo's on!"

Fili squealed as she zipped to the catwalk's rail to watch. "Go Sonata! Go, go—wah!"

Demeter's Lasso snapped around her, then caught Radiance and Humdrum. Saddle Rager ducked before the rope could snag her. The rope's other end tied itself around the Matter-Horn, bringing her down. The rope swung around the three brainwashed mares and dragon, tying them together. They struggled against their bounds.

"My magic!" the Matter-Horn cried, looking up at her horn. "It's not working!"

"Did I mention Bessie renders all magic and powers useless?" Mare-velous said, kneeling down to her. "Guess we know who'll win in a fight now."

"Uh, Mare-velous?" Zapp said. "Hate to burst your gloating bubble, but the battle's not over yet!"

She pointed to the stage where the Dazzlings were still vocalizing. The three heroes hastened over to their mics.

" *Welcome to the show,* " Adagio sang, spreading her hooves out towards the audience.

" *We're here to let you know.*

Our time is now. "

They sang together while pointing, " *Your time is running out* ."

"Their voices," Mare-velous said.

"They sound…" Zapp said.

"Good," Saddle Rager finished.

Indeed, their voices were haunting. The backing vocals were so strong, it was almost as if more than three voices were singing.

"That taste they got of our powers must've made 'em sound good even to *us* ," Mare-velous said. "We gotta sing *now* !"

She looked over to Saddle Rager, who was frozen with fear as she looked down at the crowd of ponies. Mare-velous gently took her hoof while Zapp laid hers on her shoulder. Saddle Rager looked between them and smiled. It made her feel better knowing her friends were with her in this.

As the Dazzlings sang their next verse, enormous red sound waves pulsed from the stage.

" *Feel the wave of sound,* " they sang, reaching their hooves up and then towards the audience, " *As it crashes down.* "

The red waves spread across the stadium. Every pony's expressions, including the tied up Power Ponies', went blank and their pupils shrunk.

" *You can't turn away,* " the Dazzlings sang. " *We'll make you wanna stay-ay* ."

Their pendants glowed brightly as they rose slowly into the air.

" *We will be adored.*

Tell us that you want us. "

They sang so fiercely, commanding the ponies to love them. The light from their pendants wrapped around them, encasing them in red cocoons.

" *We won't be ignored.*

It's time for our reward.

Now you need us. "

As their cocoons broke, transparent bat-like wings sprouted from their backs.

" *Come and heed us.*

Nothing can stop us now! "

They sang too soon, for in the middle of that last long note, three other voices broke out. The Dazzlings flinched and searched for the source of the "ahs." Sonata shrugged, as if she were being blamed.

"There!" Aria cried, pointing up to the catwalk.

Zapp, Saddle Rager and Mare-velous stood on the catwalk, vocalizing into their mics. The harmony was slow and, Adagio had to admit, pitch-perfect. It was enough to make the crowd turn their attention towards them.

"What's going on?" Aria asked.

Adagio growled. "It seems Demeter's lackey wasn't the *only* one unaffected by our spell."

She and Aria glared at Sonata.

"What?" Sonata asked. "If Pinkie didn't know, how was *I* to know?"

" *Gods of Olympus* ," the heroes sang,

" *Hear our plea,*

Help us to set

These mortals free.

" *We call upon the spirits*

Of those who fought before us

To join us in our humble

Gracian chorus.

" *Bless us with your power*

Grant us your will,

Give our voices strength,

Make them low, make them shrill ."

Golden light engulfed their three bodies as they slowly rose into the air. The audience gawked in amazement.

" *We are your soldiers*

And so we will fight

For our home, for our friends,

And all that is right. "

"What do we do?" Sonata asked in worry.

"They want a *real* battle of the bands," Adagio said with a sneer, "so let's *battle.* " She returned to singing. " *What we have in store.* "

Her sisters sang backup.

" *All we want and more.* "

The audience turned their attention back to the Sirens.

" *We will break on through.* "

They sang the last line together, " *Now it's time to finish you!* "

Their eyes suddenly glowed red. Saddle Rager gasped in fright.

"Don't let 'em scare ya!" Mare-velous said. "Keep singin'!"

" *Gods of Olympus,*

Hear our plea,

Help us to set

These mortals free ."

Down below, red beams shot upward out of the Dazzlings' pendants. The heroes gaped as three giant hippocampi were projected into the sky. These were the Sirens' true forms. The giant avatars charged towards the heroes while the Dazzlings floated idly onstage, smiling wickedly as their glowing eyes remained open.

"What now?" Zapp asked.

"We go to the solos!" Mare-velous exclaimed.

"Solos?!" Saddle Rager squeaked.

"Trust me!"

"I'll go first," Zapp said, bringing her mic closer to her mouth.

As she sang her solo, Mare-velous and Saddle Rager vocalized as backup.

" *I call upon Zeus,*

Lord of the Sky,

Who fashions the storms

And made pegasi fly ."

The Sirens' avatars drew back as Zapp glowed brighter and a white beam shot upwards. When Zapp opened her eyes, they were completely white. The beam then took the form of a giant pegasus stallion. In his hoof was a jagged lightning bolt.

"Zeus?!" Aria exclaimed with a jump. "They have *Zeus* on their side?!"

"Pinkie didn't tell me *that* either," Sonata said. "Or she may have, but I forgot."

"Doesn't matter!" Adagio shouted. "Keep singing!"

They vocalized as they controlled their avatars. The giant hippocampi swam around the image of Zeus. He threw his lightning bolt at him, striking Aria's avatar and sending her momentarily backward. Mare-velous then sang her solo.

" *I call upon Demeter,*

Lady of the Fields,

Who nurtures and protects

The crop that she wields ."

Gold light surrounded her and then shot up into the sky, taking the form of an earth mare with a lasso. Mare-velous opened her eyes to reveal that they were completely golden. The Demeter avatar whipped her golden lasso towards Sonata's avatar, snagging her tail.

Grunting in annoyance, Adagio sang louder. Red sound waves came out of her avatar's mouth. The avatars of Zeus and Demeter were sent backwards. Aria and Sonata also sang louder, sending red waves through their avatars. Saddle Rager had to cling to her friends to keep them all from moving backwards. Unfortunately, that forced her to drop her mic.

Now she was going to have to sing her solo. Without a microphone. All eyes were on her, and it didn't help that twelve of those eyes belonged to three scary red-eyed sirens and their holograms. Saddle Rager shut her eyes, wanting to crawl into a hole and hide.

Then Discord's voice echoed in her head: *Even if I'm in stone, I will be with you. They can take my statue to the edge of the world, but my heart and spirit will never leave you. Sing for* me *, because I know that anything that comes out of your mouth will be beautiful.*

Feeling sudden warmth in her heart, Saddle Rager squeezed her friends tighter, opened her mouth, and sang in the sweetest, clearest voice anyone had ever heard.

" *I call upon Discord,*

Lord of Chaos… "

The Dazzlings all stiffened, their expressions turning from smug to fearful.

"Did she just say…?" Aria said.

"It can't be," Adagio said.

" *Hear me,* " Saddle Rager sang, " *I surrender…* " She opened her eyes to show that they were as red as the Dazzlings'. " *In our singing séance* ."

As a red beam shot into the sky, the heroes sang the chorus again.

" *Gods of Olympus,*

Hear our plea,

Help us to set

These mortals free ."

As they started their song all over again, the red beam emitting from Saddle Rager transformed into a strange, serpentine being. Adagio recoiled in fright, her eyes returning to normal.

"Discord," she murmured.

The three godly avatars joined hooves—or claw and paw in Discord's case—and raised their appendages into the air. A ball of red, gold and white light swirled above them. Sonata and Aria backed away with their sister.

The ball blasted towards the Sirens' avatars, dispelling their images, and then swept over the Dazzlings. As they were overwhelmed by the divine magic, their pendants cracked and shattered. There was a flash of light that nearly blinded the entire stadium.

When it went away, every pony blinked as they tried to get a sense of their surroundings. The tied up Power Ponies glanced around in confusion.

"Where are we?" the Matter-Horn asked. "And Mare-velous, why did you tie us up?"

Mare-velous, Zapp and Saddle Rager were no longer glowing and were now standing on the catwalk, looking down at the stage. The Dazzlings were on the floor, shaking from the explosion. Opening her eyes, Adagio saw the shards of their amulets. With a horrified gasp, she picked up the shards, looked out at the audience and

attempted to sing.

" *We will be adored!* " Her voice came out as an off-key screech. " *Tell us that you…* "

The audience booed at her awful singing.

"No," Adagio said, staring at the shards in her hooves. "No, no, no, *no* !"

"Ha!" Zapp cried, flying down to rub the victory in their faces. "That'll teach ya to mess with the Soldiers of Olympus!" She put her hoof to her chin. "Hey, I like the sound of that. We should make it a club or something! Can ya have a club within a club?"

Saddle Rager also flew down to them. Mare-velous wore a smug expression as she used her lasso to lower herself down, after freeing her comrades, of course.

"Not so hot and confident now, are ya?" she said tauntingly.

"You fools!" Adagio shouted, growling as she stood up. "Do you have any idea what you've just *done* ?!"

"Uh," Zapp said, "I think we just defeated you!"

"We, um," Saddle Rager said, blushing, "whooped your butts."

"You've *damned* us!" Adagio cried, showing them the shards. "Do you think Circe just *gave* these to us?! Do you have any idea what we had to *trade* to get these?!"

There was a loud boom as a swirling vortex suddenly opened up behind the Dazzlings. Sonata cried out as she was sucked into it. She disappeared instantly. Aria tried to run away, but the vortex pulled her in too. Adagio gripped the edge of the stage as she fought against the portal's force. She growled up at the heroes.

"Our *souls* !" she shouted as she attempted to heave herself forward. "We traded our *souls* to get those amulets! Now that they're broken, we'll be forced to serve Circe forever on her island!"

Sonata's head poked through the vortex. "Adagio!"

She squeaked as she was sucked back in. Saddle Rager felt the vortex pulling her in too. Mare-velous quickly used her lasso to tether her and her friends to a stage light. Adagio was losing her grip as one hoof slipped out from under her.

"You think you've won?" she said to the heroes. "You have no idea what evil you've just unleashed!"

"Yeah?" Zapp shouted over the swirls of the vortex. "Well if you come back, we'll be ready!"

"I'm not talking about us!" She narrowed her eyes at Saddle Rager. "I'm talking about *her* !"

Saddle Rager blinked. "Me?"

"It took *twelve gods* to lock that demon away! You think you ponies stand a chance against *him* ?! Even *Hades* shuddered in his presence! Soon you'll *wish* we had succeeded! At least under our rule, under our spell, you would've been ignorantly…"

Her other hoof gave way and she fell back into the vortex.

"HAPPYYYYYYYY!"

The portal closed around her and all was still. The three heroes fell to the floor. The Matter-Horn flapped down to help them up.

"Now," she said, "can some pony please explain to me *what in Tartarus just happened* ?!"

One full explanation later, the Power Ponies and Humdrum were sitting in a booth at *La Comida.* After the craziness of the past couple of days, they felt they needed a breather. Since they were all in costume, no pony questioned them hanging out together. As a bonus, the restaurant owner had offered them dinner on the house as a reward for saving Maretropolis yet again.

"So we were under a spell the entire time?" Radiance asked, blinking in wonderment.

"Guess that explains why I was so angry at all of you for no apparent reason," Fili-Second said as she scarfed down some nachos.

"Uh, Mare-velous," the Matter-Horn said, clearing her throat, "if I said some things while in that trance…"

"Don't worry about it," Mare-velous said, waving her hoof. "What matters is y'all are back to normal." She watched as Fili-Second devoured their bowl of nachos with lightning speed. "Whatever that means."

"And Saddle Rager!" Radiance exclaimed. "I had no idea you could sing like that, darling!"

Saddle Rager blushed. "I was afraid at first, but once I had faith in myself," she clutched Zapp's and Mare-velous' hooves, "and faith in my friends, and faith in…"

She paused when she caught Zapp's and Mare-velous' fearful glances. They shook their heads insistently. It'd been a long night, and the rest of the team just wasn't ready to know about Saddle Rager's divine link.

"That is, I…" She grinned. "I just needed to believe that I could do it, and it made me feel better knowing my friends believed in me too."

"You know something?" Zapp said. "I think I kinda felt Zeus out there. Like…he was inside me for a moment." She frowned. "Not in a weird way, of course."

Mare-velous chuckled. "Ya ain't alone, Zapp."

"So," Fili-Second said, her voice sounding sad for a moment, "are the Sirens really…gone?"

"If I know my Gracian mythology," the Matter-Horn said, "if they had sold their souls to Circe, they should be on her island, Aeanea."

Fili twaddled her hooves together in thought. "Think they have phones in Aeanea?"

Mare-velous raised an eyebrow at her.

"I'm just saying it'd be nice if Sonata were able to give me a call."

They all looked at her strangely.

"What?" Fili-Second said with a shrug. "She wasn't *that* bad a girlfriend. Aside from the whole brainwashing thing, she was kinda fun."

Radiance and Zapp facehoofed themselves while the Matter-Horn shook her head.

"What?" Fili said again.

"There's somethin' wrong with ya," Mare-velous said.

"What? It's not like she made me do anything inappropriate. The whole making out in the sound booth supply closet was *my* idea."

"Please!" Zapp said, holding up her hoof. "I don't want that image back in my head!"

While Zapp and Fili-Second argued, Saddle Rager glanced sideways at Mare-velous.

"I felt him too."

Mare-velous turned to her.

"What…Adagio said," Saddle Rager said, biting her lip. "I…I don't believe it. I mean…I know he was put in stone for a reason, but…he *helped* me today, Mare-velous. I know it."

"Hon," Mare-velous said, placing her hoof over hers. "I…I won't lie that I'm…wary about this…connection ya have with…" She heaved a heavy sigh. "Just…remember what ya promised me, okay?"

Saddle Rager nodded. "Okay." She frowned. "But what did Adagio

mean when she said…I'd *unleashed* him?"

"She was probably just talkin' about ya usin' his magic," Mare-velous said quickly. "Probably nothin' to worry about."

Meanwhile, in the sculpture garden of the Maretropolis Museum, a dark light pulsed against the chest of Discord's statue. There was a loud *crack* as the crack in the statue's chest snaked up to his left shoulder, up his eagle arm, and to the tip of his talon. There was a deep laugh as a voice spoke.

" *Well done, my darling.* " If anyone were looking closely, they would see a speck of yellow on the statue's fingertip. " *It won't be long now.* "

Applejack's dealing with the Dazzlings in the bathroom was based off how I usually deal with bullies and internet trolls.

Wrote the "Gods' Song" myself. Thought something more original and more appropriate to the theme of this arc would be better than just using "The Music in Me."

I'm going to be taking a break from this fanfiction because, truth be told, there are SO many ways the next arc could go, and I need time to figure out which direction would be the best! In the meantime, it's back to "Lavender Arrow."

Heart of Stone: Prologue

A prelude to the next saga. I've been wanting to write something like this for a *long* time!

" *Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light."*

- Helen Keller

Thousands of years ago…

All was dark. He could not see a thing, nor could he move. But he could still hear. He could hear the voices of the Olympian gods.

"Is he…dead?" asked the perpetually drunken voice of Dionysus.

"Not dead," said the cool voice of Hera. "Just stone."

Stone? They had turned him to *stone* ?! He wanted to shout, but his jaw would not budge from its wide-open position. Perhaps he should not have laughed so cockily at the gods' threat. Even if he had not given in to their demands and relinquished his control over the mortal realm, which he would have greatly preferred, he could have at least ran or attempted a counter spell.

Well, how was *he* to know their attack would actually be *successful* ?

"I must say," said the voice of Aphrodite, "if nothing else, he will make a *lovely* lawn ornament."

"Or paperweight," said the voice of Athena.

He wanted to groan in fury. He did not know which goddess he found more annoying: prissy Aphrodite or bookish Athena.

"I am afraid none of us should make a trophy of him," said the youthful voice of Apollo. "I have just received a premonition."

He could hear the gods gathering around to hear Apollo's latest prophecy. He too listened intently.

"Then he will one day be freed," said Hephaestus after hearing the prophecy.

"By a mortal pony," said Apollo.

"But not for a long, long time," said Poseidon.

"No matter how far in the future this will be," said Demeter, "if he were ever to be set free, the mortal realm will be worse than Tartarus."

"Demeter is right," said Athena. "We must put the mortals' safety first."

"I say we shatter that confounded sculpture!" said Ares.

"Works for me," said Artemis.

He could hear a sword being drawn and a bowstring tightening.

"Shattering it will only make things worse," said Hera. "The stone seals his essence. If any part of this statue were to be broken, his essence would be freed."

"Then we must put him someplace no mortal will ever find him," said Zeus.

"I know a place across the sea that has yet to be discovered by mortal ponies," said Athena. "No pony will ever find him there."

The gods muttered to each other and came to an agreement. He heard the sounds of their weapons charging up. The sounds grew louder and louder, ultimately forming into a powerful blast.

Then all was silent.

He listened carefully as he tried to make sense of where he was. The only sound was that of a water droplet. *Drip! Drip! Drip!*

Where had they sent him? Some silent torture chamber in Tartarus?

Then another sound broke through the silence. A high-pitched shriek, like that of a bat. They had placed him in a cave of some sort.

If he had understood Apollo's prophecy correctly, he would not be condemned to this prison forever. The gods could try to cheat fate all they wanted, but they knew as well as he did that Apollo's prophecies were always fulfilled. A mortal pony would come one day to free him, though he honestly could not think of any pony stupid enough to do such a thing. However, it would not happen for many years, centuries even.

So there was nothing left for him to do but wait.

A cell in Tartarus would have been much more entertaining. At least then some of the horrified screams from the other cells would break through to his ears. In this cave of isolation, there was nothing to listen to but water dripping from the ceiling, the squeaky bats, and the occasional scurry of a rodent he could not determine. He could feel insects crawling all over his body, even over his jaw. He *wished* they had blasted him while his mouth had been closed.

All this waiting in silence gave the opportunity for deep thought. As time went on, he thought about how he would torture each and every one of the Olympian gods once he got out. Poseidon, he would place in a hot desert, barren of any water. Dionysus would not be given anything to drink *but* water. Artemis would be stuffed like her hunting trophies. Aphrodite, he would make absolutely hideous. Or, even worse, he would curse every mirror so she would never revel in her reflection again. The list went on.

He also reviewed his hostile takeover to pinpoint where he had gone wrong. His biggest mistake had been underestimating the Olympians. Next time, he would not act so cocky to a point where he would let his guard down.

He also discovered the answer to life, the universe, and everything. Who knew it was "forty-two" all along?

Whenever he was tired of thinking, he would count the drops of water that came from the ceiling. *Drip! Drip! Drip!* It would take at least five-thousand and twenty-seven drops to put him in a deep trance. Gods did not require sleep, but it was refreshing to completely zone out for a while, and it made the time go by quicker.

He did not know how long he had been here. Any longer in this void and he would have gone mad. Well, madder than he already was. Where was this Keeper when he needed them?

One day—or night, he could not tell—he heard a gust of wind blow through the cave. There must have been some storm outside for that much wind to come through. If he could move, he would shiver from the sting of the cold. Of course, after being encased in stone all this time, he had gotten used to the cold.

Suddenly, there was a sound. It was new, yet familiar. A sound he had not heard for a very long time. It was low and soft, but it cut through the silence like a knife.

It was the sound of hoofsteps, accompanied by heavy panting. The sounds came closer, closer, until they stopped. There was a high squeak, much different from that of a bat. It sounded…clearer, like the ting of a silver bell. This was followed by a soft sigh.

"Oh," said a voice. "It's just a statue."

The voice was shrill, but soft. Based on the fact that he had heard hoofsteps, he concluded that this was a young filly. She was not speaking Gracian, but being a god, he could understand any language. At least he knew now that he was not somewhere in Grace.

He wanted the filly to keep talking. He had not had any contact with the outside world for such a long while, and her sweet voice was music to his ears.

There were hoofsteps again. The filly was close enough that he

could hear her rapid breathing. *Does she know who I am* ? He thought. *Even if not, will she turn and run from my…unique appearance?*

He was caught by surprise when he felt something warm at his frozen foot and hoof. It was fur. Not filthy rodent fur, but soft, clean pony fur. Well, not *entirely* clean as it was also soaked. The filly must have gotten caught in the storm outside and had come in here for shelter.

He heard her tiny whimper as she curled her small body around his foot and hoof. After years of being subjected to this cold stone prison, this was the first bit of warmth he had felt. Even as she shivered, her warmth spread from his feet, up his legs, and to his heart.

It was…relieving.

He heard a sniff, and soon he realized the filly was not only shivering, but crying. His heart stopped, having the sudden urge to scoop the filly up in his arms, cradle her and shield her from the cold. He was not sure why he was feeling this way. Perhaps it was because being imprisoned here had developed a sort of…loneliness inside him.

He was used to being alone. Everyone feared him, even the fiercest of gods, titans and demons. And he had never complained, for he had had no interest in making friends when his magic allowed him to do whatever he wanted. But at least while he had been free, he could still make contact with others, albeit with malicious intent. He had no one to torture here, no one to tease, no one to play with.

That still did not explain where this sudden compassion for a crying filly was coming from. It was not like he had not heard a filly cry before. He had *caused* many fillies to cry. Why was this time any different?

Then she spoke again in that tiny voice, "Oh why, why, *why* am I so weak?"

She sniffed hard. He wished he could snap up a handkerchief for

her.

"If only I could fly, if only I didn't have these *tiny* wings, then I wouldn't've fallen off that cloud!"

So she was a pegasus. One who had difficulty flying, apparently. *A pegasus who cannot fly,* he thought. *How delightfully bizarre.*

And he reveled in all things bizarre.

"All the ponies at Flight Camp make fun of me, you know?" she said in a strained voice. "Two colts were making fun of me this morning, because I tripped over a hoop and crashed into a flag. They called me," she whimpered, " *Clutter* shy. One colt said his baby brother could fly better than me." He felt her small face upon the toe of his dragon foot. "It was the most humiliating moment of my life!"

The warmth welling up inside him now was not due to her fur anymore, but due to his anger towards those colts. Of course, he had been guilty of making fun of others, but this filly had been made fun of for being different. And he knew better than anyone what it was like to be different.

"I don't know what I would've done had Rainbow Dash not stood up for me," she said, a hint of hope in her voice. "Oh, but she just *had* to challenge those colts to a race. The colts flew by me so fast that I fell out of the sky! Oh, I'm okay. Thankfully, those butterflies were there to catch me."

It was as if she knew he was listening. He had felt like screaming over her being injured, until she had assured him that that was not the case. And the circumstances of her safety were remarkable! Caught by butterflies? Could a mortal have that kind of magnetism?

His little black heart beat against the stone surface of his chest. She might as well have fallen from Mount Olympus itself.

"I wonder if any pony even knows I'm here," she said, her voice becoming sad again, "or if they even miss me. Even if they *do* miss me, how will they even know where to find me? Who knows how long *you* have been here?"

I know what it is like to feel forgotten, little one , he thought. *I wonder if anyone misses me as well.*

"Oh, *why* couldn't I be brave? If I had stood up to those colts myself instead of let some pony else do it for me, I wouldn't be in this mess!"

If I *had been there, I would not have been so merciful as to challenge those brats to a race.* If he could, he would be growling. *I would have wrung their necks, turned them inside out and worn them as shawls!*

"I wish I were stronger."

Her tears were hot as they plopped onto his foot. Oh, how he longed to reach his claw down and wipe the tears from her eyes.

It simply was not right, a sweet little thing like her crying because some colts had made her feel inferior. Others had said awful things about himself, once upon a time, but he had learned to accept that he was despised. This filly, however, did not have such resilience. She was just a youngling with a terrible disadvantage.

I wish I could move. I wish I could speak. I wish I were able to lift your sorrows, or at least teach those brats a lesson! Or, I could teach you *to teach them a lesson! If I still had my powers, I would not only make your wings stronger. I would make you the strongest mortal alive, a worthy rival of Heracles!*

Suddenly, there was a burning sensation on his chest. It did not take him long to realize what it was.

My amulet. My anger must have awoken it!

"Huh?" said the filly.

He could feel her body lift itself from his foot and her hooves go to his stomach. He feared at what she was about to do.

No, little one! He wanted to shout. *Keep away, please! There's no telling what…*

The filly squealed as he heard an explosion, followed by a thump. His fear increased dramatically.

Oh, no, no, no, no! Tell me she did not touch it! Tell me I did not kill her! Please, Hades old boy, grant me this one wish!

He heard a whimper and he wanted to sigh in relief. She was not dead, but she must have been badly injured. He listened in suspense, counting the seconds between each breath. *Five…four… five again…seven…why is her breathing so* slow *?!*

She said nothing for a long time, but her breath never ceased.

"Hello?" a voice called from a distance. "Is any pony in here?"

"Yes!" the filly shouted, grunting. He pictured her attempting to rise. "I'm in here! Help!"

There were hoofsteps and he could make out three distinctive adult voices.

"There's a filly in here!"

"Is it the filly we're looking for?"

"Must be!"

"Gah! What *is* that ugly thing?"

He wanted to roll his eyes as the newcomers made comments on his appearance.

"Look at that jewel around his neck!"

"Don't touch it!" the filly yelled. "It's cursed! I touched it and it exploded!"

His heart sank at the fear in her voice. Eventually, all beings learned to fear him. Why should she be any different?

"I know some archaeologists who would be interested in this little beauty."

"Come on, sweetheart. Your parents have been worried sick about you."

No! He tried to shout. *Do not take her away! Please! At least let me explain what happened!*

But how could he explain? He was trapped.

He had hurt ponies before. Killed a few even. But this was the first time he had hurt some pony he was actually beginning to like. And it had been unintentional.

It is just as well she thinks me a monster. Every other injury I had inflicted had *been intentional.*

Once the hoofsteps of the ponies had faded away, there was silence again. He did not know how long it was before hoofsteps approached once again. There were many new voices murmuring amongst each other.

"Amazing," said a stallion's voice in an accent he did not recognize.

"What do you make of it, Dr. Caballeron?" asked a young mare's voice.

"It is impossible," said Dr. Caballeron, "but this statue appears to be Gracian in origin."

"Gracian?"

"It would seem so, my young apprentice."

He felt a hoof on his goat leg. It was not as soft as the sweet filly's had been, but hard and rough.

"It's definitely similar in style," said the young mare. "A statue with this much patchwork can only be a tribute to the God of Chaos, Discord."

"You would be correct, Miss Yearling," said Caballeron. "But how an ancient Gracian statue came to be in a cave a few miles outside of Cloudsdale is a mystery."

Cloudsdale. I have not heard of this city.

"Do not touch the jewel, Miss Yearling. The filly who came across this statue was severely injured after touching it. Rumors have it she experiences side effects even now."

What side effects? What did I do to her? Tell me!

"Legend has it the evil God of Chaos was turned to stone," said Miss Yearling, "and that he wielded a powerful jeweled pendant called the Amulet of Chaos. You don't think…?"

Whoever this Miss Yearling was, she was a clever one. After the two ponies talked some more, he felt himself being lifted up onto something.

Next thing he knew, he was somewhere out in the open. He could tell from the warm heat of the sun and the birds tweeting all around. Soon he heard voices. Several of them. So many that he could not follow every single conversation.

There was a stallion's voice close by that spoke, "And this, children, is our latest addition to our museum's sculpture garden. Discord, the God of Chaos!"

He could hear the cringes and moans of several foals.

"He's *ugly* !"

"He's scary!"

"He's cool!"

"Legend has it," said the stallion, "that thousands of years ago, the gods of Ancient Grace sealed the God of Chaos in a stone prison and shut him away somewhere mortals would never find him…until today, that is."

"Is this him, Mr. Fetlock?" a colt asked.

"If it is," said Mr. Fetlock, "he can't do any harm in there. He's just a statue. Hey! The sign says 'Do Not Touch!'"

So. This *is how I am remembered? I, the god who struck fear into the hearts of titans, now reduced to a harmless statue put on display like an animal?*

He would bet his amulet that the gods were laughing down at him from Mount Olympus this very moment.

Despite the shame, the museum beat the cave. At least here the sounds were always changing. Listening to mortals' conversations made it harder for him to become bored. Eventually, he picked up on the modern dialect, learning new words like "swell" and "dontcha."

But there was a downside to hearing all these conversations. The ponies who came to visit him would comment on how funny-looking he was. Some would laugh and taunt him for being so stupid as to let himself be turned to stone. He was lucky the curator Mr. Fetlock did not tolerate vandalism.

Then one day, some pony said, "Hello?"

He tuned out all the other sounds around him and focused on this one voice. It was *her* voice.

"I…" she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know if you can hear me in there, but…you should know…I dropped out of Flight Camp. Those colts don't bother me anymore."

All these ponies visiting his statue, and she was still the only one who spoke *to* him as if he were a living, breathing being.

"Your name is Discord, isn't it? I mean…that's what the plaque says."

He smiled internally at hearing her speak his name. There was no sense of condescendence, revulsion or fear in it. She said it calmly, casually, as if the name carried no weight with it at all.

"So I guess…that's really you in there, isn't it? You're not just a statue, are you? I mean you couldn't just be an ordinary statue if that necklace of yours…"

She paused. *No, don't stop talking. Please, please, go on.*

"Why did you do this to me?" she said, her voice cracking. "Why did you make me a monster?"

He was stunned by her words. *Monster? Had I really hurt her* that *much?*

"I can't go to school with other ponies anymore. I'm afraid…" She sniffed. "I'm afraid of hurting ponies."

Please, don't cry. Whatever I did, I didn't mean to do it!

Oh, how he longed for her to hear him.

"The plaque calls you evil," she said. "What did you do to deserve being put in stone though? It can't be very comfortable in there."

Little one, you have no *idea.*

"How do you eat? How do you drink? How do you go to the bathroom?"

It amused him that this filly thought gods had the same needs as mortals. Still, her concern was admirable. He *did* miss indulging in food and drink, and his mouth was feeling dry from being open for so long.

"Can you see? Can you hear? I know you can't move. What if you have an itchy nose? That can't be very fun."

His eyes suddenly itched, and he wondered if there was a bird pecking at them. *She* gets *me.*

"Well, whatever you did, I don't think you deserve this."

He wanted to embrace her. He wanted to hold her close. He wanted to thank her a million times over. More importantly, he wanted to see her.

He tried to put a face to the voice. She was a pegasus, and a child, that much he knew. But was she plain? Was she beautiful? Not that it really mattered, as what was beautiful to ponies was usually hideous to him.

He wondered what she had meant by "monster." Had she been literally scarred by her injury? Was she so deformed that she felt like a monster? If so, then that just made her all the more interesting.

On the other hand, knowing he had been the cause of such deformity made him feel…bad. He had been *born* repulsive. While he could deal with it, he had not wanted to force the same fate onto another. It was bad enough she was teased for her inability to fly.

"I don't know why you've cursed me," she said, "but…I forgive you."

Forgiveness. No one had ever offered him forgiveness.

"Fluttershy!" a mare's voice called. "Your brother wants to see the next exhibit. Are you coming?"

"Yes, Mom! In a minute!" The filly then whispered to him, "I'll come see you again."

He listened to the delicate sound of her hoofsteps as they faded away.

Fluttershy. The name sounds just as sweet as her voice.

He repeated the name over and over again in his head, enjoying the sound of it more and more each time. Never had he felt this way towards another, never had his heart been so warm, never had he the compulsion to do anything…pleasant to another.

I will not forget the kindness you've shown me, dearest Fluttershy, he vowed. *If you are still living when I get out, I will give you the greatest reward worthy of a goddess.*

Heart of Stone: Part 1

" *Beauty is when you can appreciate yourself. When you love yourself, that's when you're most beautiful.* "

- Zoe Kravitz

Fluttershy was sitting at her vanity, brushing her long, pink mane and humming a sleepy tune. Her brushing slowed when she looked in the mirror. In it, she saw a meek little mare with a very tangled mane. She lowered her eyes as she continued brushing.

Then she caught another glimpse of her reflection. This time, she had to a do a double-take.

The mare in the mirror wore a twisted expression. Her eyes were red and her teeth were ground together in fury. Her muscled shoulders bulged around her face, making her look even more menacing. Dropping her brush, Fluttershy gripped the edges of her stool in terror.

Then all of a sudden, something cold touched her shoulder. Closing her eyes, Fluttershy brought her hoof to the object and felt that it was an eagle's talon.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "I was hoping you'd come."

There was a low chuckle. " *Are you purposely having nightmares just so you can see me?* "

She opened her eyes. "No, no! I'm actually having a nightmare now."

Looking in the mirror, she saw the claw on her shoulder, but everything else behind her was a dark shadow.

"Though you can hardly call this *seeing* you. Why do I always dream

of you in the shadows?"

A lion's paw appeared in the mirror as it cupped under her chin. " *I can never see* your *face. Kind of evens the odds, don't you think? Anyway, what has you so frightened tonight?* "

As the paw moved slowly to her mane, Fluttershy gazed sadly at her reflection. "M-Me." The paw stopped moving. "I'm frightened of… myself."

There was a scoff. " *Trust me. I* know *frightening, and there's* nothing *frightening about* you *."*

"Not me. The *other* me. And…well, maybe the real me too. It's just that no matter how many times I look in the mirror, I'm not," she hung her head, " *happy* with what I see."

There was silence for a moment. " *You don't think you're pretty?* "

She shook her head. "It's not so much what's on the outside, it's just…I'm afraid of what's on the *inside* ."

She lifted her head when laughter echoed throughout her surroundings.

"What's so funny?"

" *Oh, I didn't mean to chortle. It's just so funny you should say that, because* I've *never seen what you look like on the outside, and* I'm *not afraid of you.* "

She sighed. "You're the God of Chaos. You're not afraid of anything."

" *Well, that's true* ." He paused. " *Actually, no, it isn't. I* am *afraid of* one *thing* ."

"What's that?"

She let out a small gasp as the eagle claw took a strand of her hair between its fingers. She felt something press against the strand. Then she heard the sound of someone inhaling, but there was no

snout in the mirror.

" *I'm afraid that I won't get out of this stone prison, and that I'll never be able to put a face to your voice.* "

"I thought you said it didn't matter what I looked like."

" *It doesn't, but it'd still be nice to have* some *idea of what you look like. I already know you're a pegasus. But what else?* "

She hung her head again. "There's…not much to tell."

" *Ridiculous! There's* plenty *to tell! Tell me about your mane, your eyes, your coat color! Anything that would make it easier to pick you out of a crowd!* "

Gulping, she replied, "W-Well, uh…my m-mane is…pink?"

" *Pink.* " There was a heavy sigh. " *I always* did *like that color. So vibrant, so lively.* "

"My coat is yellow, and my eyes are…well, some think blue, some think green, but it's more in between. Like a…"

" *Teal?* "

"Yes, yes. A teal."

Another sigh came. " *You sound* beautiful."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't get your hopes up."

His claw cupped her chin and slowly lifted it so she could face the mirror. Fluttershy gasped in surprise. The mare in the mirror was dressed in a gorgeous green gown, her pink mane was braided with daisies, and her face was practically *sparkling* ! Fluttershy lifted her hoof to the glass, not believing that this was her reflection.

" *It will not matter what you truly look like. To me* ," the voice whispered in her ear, " *you are the sweetest, kindest, most beautiful creature ever to come into existence.* "

The reflection had pink in its cheeks.

" *If you'd let me out,* " he said, his paw going down her back, " *I could tell all this to your face.* "

Fluttershy frowned. "Oh, but I don't know how."

" *All you have to do is accept my gifts.* "

She blinked. "Accept your gifts?"

" *Of course. Let me out…* " She gasped as his paw wrapped around her middle. " *…and I will be at your disposal.* "

She closed her eyes, breathing sharply as his claw tangled in her mane.

" *Anything you desire,* " he said, his warm breath on her neck, " *and it will be yours, my…* "

The sharp buzzing tone of her alarm clock snapped her out of the dream. Fluttershy sat up in bed and slammed her hoof on the digital clock. Sighing, she flopped back onto her pillow, smiling and blushing fiercely at the dream she had just had.

While Applejack was flipping apple flapjacks on the stove, her ears picked up on some humming. As the hums grew louder, they became a series of "la-la-las." Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Fluttershy twirling into the kitchen. Her eyes were blissfully closed as she sang and got plates out from the cabinet. It was a miracle she didn't drop anything in her trance.

"My, my, *some pony's* in a good mood today," Applejack said as she flipped over a flapjack. "You're even singin' in front of me."

"I *am* in a good mood today," Fluttershy said as she seated herself at the table. "I haven't had a sleepless night in *ages* ! And it's all thanks to…"

She trailed off, but Applejack didn't need to hear the rest. She

looked at her roommate warily.

"You were dreamin' about… *him* again, weren't you?"

Fluttershy looked down at her hooves "Would it be so bad if I was?"

Sighing, Applejack flipped some flapjacks onto the two plates Fluttershy had gotten out. "Look, I know our victory against the Sirens last week was a real breakthrough for ya, but…" She set the plates down as she joined her roommate at the table. "Has it ever crossed yerr mind that this…connection ya have with Discord might be…dangerous?"

Fiddling with her fork, Fluttershy said, "He hasn't… *seemed* dangerous so far."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Need I remind ya he *did* try and enslave the world with his chaos?"

"But that was in the past. What if…?" She spoke quietly. "What if he's changed?"

"Sugar," Applejack said slowly, "I've met enough gods to know that they can't go against their nature, and Discord's all for chaos."

"So? That doesn't necessarily make him *bad* . And after being in stone for thousands of years, don't you think he's learned his lesson by now?"

"Ya can't know that for sure."

"Neither can you."

Shutting her eyes, Applejack released a sigh. "I just want ya to be careful, okay?"

"Alright."

The earth mare started eating her breakfast. "So, ya got any plans for after work today?"

"Well, I do plan to stop by the museum for a little while…"

Dropping her utensils, Applejack said, "Uh…actually I was…hopin' we'd go out tonight! To celebrate, uh…life!" She winced. "And, uh, afterwards maybe we could do some nightly patrol together?"

Fluttershy blinked. " *You're* asking *me* to go on nightly patrol with you?"

She nodded. "Yup!"

"But…you *never* ask me to go on nightly patrol with you. Or *any pony* for that matter."

Applejack gulped. "Well, uh…you've just made so much progress that…I feel I should take ya along and give ya some pointers, you still bein' new and all. It'll be fun! Just us gal pals, ownin' the night, beatin' up purse snatchers and muggers!"

Fluttershy tilted her head curiously at her roommate. Applejack was clearly hiding something. She just wasn't sure what.

"I…guess that would be fun," Fluttershy said.

Applejack let out a sigh of relief. She still hadn't told Fluttershy about Demeter's warning to stay away from Discord's statue. With all the sympathy towards Discord building up in Fluttershy, Applejack was even more convinced that telling her she was the key to his freedom would only convince her to go to him even *more.* And, call her crazy, the heavy amount of red in Fluttershy's cheeks gave Applejack cause to suspect that what her roommate was feeling was *more* than mere sympathy.

"Have a nice day!" Fluttershy said, giving the customer a smile as she handed him his cat. "Remember to come back in six months!"

As the customer left, Doctor Fauna stepped up to the front desk. "I must say, Fluttershy, I've never seen you in such a good mood! Usually you're too *terrified* to talk to the patients' owners!"

"I know, right?" Fluttershy said with a squeak. "I don't know what it is about today, but I just feel so cheery and… *confident* !"

Doctor Fauna smiled. "Well, are you confident that you can take your lunch break now?"

"Are you sure? I wouldn't want to leave you to take care of the animals all by yourself."

Her boss waved her hoof. "We don't have that many appointments this afternoon. Go, have your break and I'll have mine when you get back."

"Okay, Doctor Fauna."

With a skip in her step, Fluttershy grabbed her saddlebag and left the clinic. As soon as she stepped outside, she inhaled the fresh air of the city.

"Ah, what a beautiful day," she said with a sigh. "I'm in the mood for something baked. I should go swing by Applejack's cart and say hello."

She was about to walk down the street when something caught her ear. It was the sound of several dogs barking.

"Strange," she said, looking back at the veterinary clinic. "We don't have *that* many dogs staying with us today."

The barking grew louder, causing her to turn her head. A stampede of dogs was running up the street, barking frantically!

"Oh, goodness!" Fluttershy approached the edge of the stampede. "Um, excuse me? Hello? Are you all okay?" But the dogs were running too fast to pay her any heed. "What's gotten you all so frightened?"

She squealed as a dog pounced on her, knocking her over. Barking on top of her was a white poodle with poofy purple hair. But that wasn't the strangest part. The dog was wearing a costume and mask that bore a striking resemblance to…

"Radiance?" Fluttershy asked.

The poodle barked and nodded rapidly.

"Is that you?" Fluttershy sat up. "Who did this to you?"

Radiance the Poodle turned around and pointed her nose down the street. Standing there, laughing maniacally, was the Great and Powerful Trixie. In her hooves was a small black statuette of a dog's head.

"Yes!" Trixie cried, hoisting the statuette into the air. "With the Head of Anubis, all of Maretropolis will be turned into dogs! And then they will see that the greatest magical equine who ever lived…no! The greatest magical equine who ever *will* live is the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

She laughed again as sparks emitted from her horn.

"Not so fast, Trixie!" the Masked Matter-Horn shouted, swooping down from the sky. "I should've known it was *you* who had stolen the Head of Anubis from the museum! Return it now," she powered her horn, "or suffer the consequences!"

"You're too late, Matter-Horn!" Trixie said with a smirk. "Or should I say," she pointed the statuette at the alicorn, "Matter- *Hound* ?!"

Before the Matter-Horn could react, a red beam shot from the statuette's eyes, striking her instantly. When the light diminished, in the alicorn's place was a purple basset hound with dark purple spots, still in the Matter-Horn's costume. Having no wings, the Matter-Hound dropped to the ground. She got up immediately and barked furiously at Trixie, who only laughed.

"Aw, look at you!" she said teasingly. "You're so cute and threatening! Ha!" She kicked the basset hound hard. "Who's great and powerful now, pup?"

Fluttershy gasped in alarm. Turning ponies into dogs was *one* thing, but to kick a helpless little pony-turned-dog just for fun? Already, she could feel the blood boiling inside her.

"Not yet, Fluttershy," she growled, glancing at her flower bracelets. "Hold the anger in a little bit longer."

She quickly dashed into the nearest alley. Meanwhile, Trixie was still

taunting the Matter-Hound.

"At last!" she cried, pointing down at the fallen dog. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has defeated her greatest foe!" She placed her hoof on the dog's belly to prevent her from rising. "And to think all Trixie needed to do was steal one little statue so she could turn you into a pathetic little pup!" She raised the Head of Anubis above her head. "And now, with the Masked Matter-Hound out of the way, there's no pony powerful enough to stop the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

"How about me?"

Confused, Trixie turned to see Saddle Rager scowling a few feet away from her. "Who the heck are you?"

Saddle Rager puffed up her chest. "I'm Saddle Rager! And I'm here to defeat you!"

The unicorn blinked a few times and then cackled. "You think *you* can defeat the Great and Powerful *Trixie* ?!" She pointed at the basset hound. "Not even the Masked Matter-Horn could defeat Trixie! How can a weak little thing like *you* defeat some pony as great and powerful and amazing as Trixie?!" She glanced at the Head of Anubis. "Oh well. You'd make a nice Chihuahua anyway."

She aimed the statuette at the pegasus and fired. Saddle Rager didn't even blink as the beam bounced off her. Squealing, Trixie ducked so the reflected beam wouldn't hit her. She looked back at the now dog-shaped carrot dog cart in shock.

"B-B-But…how…?"

Saddle Rager narrowed her eyes further. "You may have the power of Anubis," she said as her eyes started to glow red, "but I have the power of *Discord* ."

Trixie fell backward, quickly catching the Head of Anubis before it could hit the ground. "Did you say D-D-D-Discord?"

The pegasus nodded. "And do you know what I *really* hate?" Trixie's jaw dropped as Saddle Rager started growing. "I hate *two* things!" The muscles in her legs doubled in size, tearing through her

costume. "When some pony messes with my friends," she said, her voice much deeper now as her shoulders broadened, "and when some pony messes with poor, defenseless," she now towered over the unicorn, "ANIMALS!"

Saddle Rager let out an angry roar, making Trixie scream. Springing to her hooves, she attempted to run away. Saddle Rager stomped after her, not even bothering to run. She caught Trixie in her hoof and brought her to her face. Trixie grinned awkwardly.

"Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

The monster roared into her face. Trixie shut her eyes as her hat was blown off. But that wasn't all that blew off. The Head of Anubis flew out of her hooves and hurdled towards the ground.

"No!" Trixie shouted, igniting her horn.

But Saddle Rager threw her hard into the air before she could try to catch the statuette. Trixie screamed as she was propelled through the sky. She stopped only when she crashed headfirst through the concrete roof of Balkham Asylum and into a prison cell.

Meanwhile, the Head of Anubis hit the street and shattered into millions of pieces. Saddle Rager shut her eyes as she was blinded by a flash of red light. When it went away, all the dogs had been transformed back into ponies.

"Saddle Rager saved us!" some pony said.

Fortunately, the pegasus had calmed down enough to shrink back to her original form, so the ponies weren't afraid to swarm around her.

"I'm so sorry!" Saddle Rager said, shrinking under their gaze. "I didn't mean to hurt any pony!"

Then she opened her eyes in surprise when they started cheering, "Saddle Rager! Saddle Rager!"

It wasn't long before reporters showed up.

"Saddle Rager! How does it feel to be the one to save Maretropolis

single-hoofedly?"

"Saddle Rager! Is it true this is your first time saving the day alone?"

"Saddle Rager! Who does your mane?"

The Masked Matter-Horn flew in and landed in front of her friend. "Don't worry, Rager. I'll distract them so you can slip away."

"Um, actually," Saddle Rager said, slowly rising to her hooves. "I'd kind of like to…answer some of their questions."

The alicorn turned to her in surprise. "Really?"

With a small smile, she nodded and addressed the reporters. "If you could be so kind as to ask your questions one at a time, please?"

While Saddle Rager was reveling in her victory, Rainbow Dash was having a row with her boss in the sculpture gardens of the Maretropolis Museum.

"Mr. Fetlock," Rainbow said, struggling to keep up with the stallion, "we can't ignore the cracks any longer. Ponies are starting to notice! We should move the statue to a secure location until…"

"I've told you!" Mr. Fetlock said with a groan. "The statue of Discord is the centerpiece to this exhibit! I can't simply move it!"

"But Daring Do said we should…"

She almost ran into him as he suddenly stopped in front of the statue in question and spun around to glare at her.

"I don't *care* what Daring Do says!" he spat venomously. "She may have donated half of the exhibits, and assisted in securing *this* one, but she does *not* own this museum! *I* do!"

Rainbow blinked. "Uh…doesn't Twilight Sparkle technically own this museum?"

Mr. Fetlock growled. " *I've* kept this establishment afloat for *decades* ! This statue has been here almost as long as I have! We've already had *one* exhibit ruined this week with the theft of the Head of Anubis, we're *not* ruining another!"

The pegasus nearly broke her spectacles as she smacked herself in the forehead. "There might not be *any* exhibit left if that statue breaks open!"

As they argued, a small ball of dark light pulsed within the statue of Discord's chest.

"What's the secret to your success?" a reporter asked, sticking her microphone towards Saddle Rager.

A lock of hair fell over Saddle Rager's eye as she shyly turned away from the cameras. She didn't like being the center of attention, but the victory and adoration from her heroic feat had instilled a newfound confidence in her.

"W-Well," she said with a slight blush, "m-my power comes from… Discord, actually."

The reporters turned to each other in confusion. Apparently, their knowledge of Gracian mythology was limited.

"Care to elaborate on that?" the same reporter asked.

"Oh, yes," Saddle Rager said, looking down at her hooves. "See, when I was a filly, I was granted my powers from a statue of Discord, the ancient Gracian God of Chaos. Whenever I become angry, I…turn."

"God of Chaos, you say?" said another reporter. "Would you call these powers a curse?"

She bit her lip. "I…I *used* to, but now…" She grinned slightly. "I feel like I was given these powers for a reason. I'm able to help so many ponies with my powers. I mean before, I had no idea I could stop an evil magician from turning every pony into dogs!"

"So you've come to *accept* the fact that your powers come from a god of chaos?" asked a third reporter.

Saddle Rager smiled further as she hugged herself. "Y-Yes. I guess I have."

"I don't *care* how realistic the statue looks," Mr. Fetlock shouted, "it is *not* the real God of Chaos!"

"And what if it *is* ?!" Rainbow exclaimed. "Look, even if you don't believe me, you at least have to put it away awhile so no further damage is done!"

Neither of them heard the crackling noises.

"It wouldn't *be* damaged if you had found that vandal like I told you!"

"There's no vandal! It's cracking all by its…"

They were knocked to the ground as something exploded beside them. Mr. Fetlock cried out as stone shards struck him. Rainbow covered her eyes as dust blew into them. Lowering her hoof, she saw the statue of Discord standing before them.

Only he wasn't stone anymore.

His long, serpentine body was brown and furry. His long neck and pony head were gray, his lion paw and eagle claw were yellow, his goat's leg was tan, his dragon's leg was green and his snake tail was red and scaly.

He was standing tall, his body stretching out as he roared like a ferocious dragon. Mr. Fetlock crawled backward in fear while Rainbow clutched the lightning bolt pendant beneath her shirt.

Then Discord's scream turned into a disgruntled yawn. His eyes popped open, revealing gold irises with red pupils. He grunted as he stretched up his arms and wriggled his body around.

"Oh, *Tartarus* !" he said, pulling back his goat leg. "Do you have *any*

idea how uncomfortable it was in there?" Sticking out his snakelike tongue, he rubbed it rapidly with his claw. "Ugh, I'm telling you, the number of birds and insects that have taken residence in here! Blech! Remind me *never* to eat bugs again!"

Rainbow stared at the creature in bewilderment, thinking, That's *the Lord of Chaos?*

She really thought he'd be scarier.

"Oh, it feels so good to be able to *move* again!" Discord said, pulling his lion arm over his chest.

During this stretch, his lion fingers snapped. After a brief flash of light, the ionic columns that held the ceiling behind him turned into cheese. Already the weight of the ceiling was pushing down on them.

Gasping, Rainbow dashed off to make a quick change.

"Alright," Discord said, snapping his other fingers, transforming a statue of Eros into gelatin. "That should do it. Now," he said, eagerly scouring his surroundings, "where is my sweet little savior?"

"My museum!" Mr. Fetlock cried.

Discord looked down at the stallion. Yelping, Mr. Fetlock jumped to his hooves, but was prevented by a snake tail which ensnared his waist. He was lifted up to Discord's eyelevel so that he was facing the God of Chaos upside-down.

"I know you," Discord said, pointing at him. "You're that Fetlock guy, right? You're the one in charge around here."

The curator's only response was a whimper. Discord saw that he was looking at the cheese pillars and gelatin Eros.

"Nice place you run here," Discord said, facing him again. "I suppose you want me to change everything back, right?"

Mr. Fetlock nodded dumbly, making Discord sigh.

"Very well. Consider it a thank you for keeping all those annoying brats from climbing on me."

With a snap of his fingers, the cheese columns were returned to normal, once again stabilizing the ceiling.

"T-The statue," Mr. Fetlock said, pointing to the gelatin. "The statue of Eros!"

"Ah, yes, Eros," Discord said, scowling. "Never quite liked that little imp. He and his meddling mother have been trying to set me up for *eons* !" He smirked. "Well, I suppose in *some* way, she…" He shook his head. "Never mind! Perhaps you can help me, mortal." He brought Fetlock closer to his face. "Where can I find the pegasus, Fluttershy Buttercream?"

The curator blinked. "D-Doctor B-B-Buttercream?"

"Yes! The mare who found me? The mare who visits me every day? Has the voice of a siren?" His eyes narrowed. "Tell me where she is, and I'll turn your pointless tribute to Eros back to normal."

"I don't know where she is!" Mr. Fetlock said with a squeak. "I mean…she hasn't been here in weeks!"

"Well then. Do you have any idea where she *might* be?"

"I-I don't know." He gulped. "Work, maybe?"

"Of course!" Discord smacked himself in the forehead. "She's a *working* mare, I forgot!" He looked back at the stallion. "Her healing center. Where is it?"

"Y-You mean S-Sweet Feathers' V-Veterinary Clinic? I-I think it's on Rover Street!"

He was suddenly dropped to the ground, causing him to cry out. Discord wore a huge grin on his face.

"Thank you oh so very much," he said, clasping his paw and claw together. "You have been oh so very helpful."

True to his word, the Eros sculpture was returned to its former marble.

"And don't worry!" Discord exclaimed as he flapped his wings. "I'll be sure to invite you!"

Rubbing his head, Mr. Fetlock looked up at the departing draconequus in confusion. "Invite me to what?"

By this time, the reporters had dispersed. Radiance was embracing Saddle Rager while the Masked Matter-Horn gathered the remains of the Head of Anubis.

"Oh, darling, you were simply *fantastic* !" Radiance said, pulling away from the pegasus. "You defeated that ruffian! Not to mention you handled those reporters very well!"

Saddle Rager blushed. "It was nothing, really."

"It was definitely *something* ! I've never seen you so…so bold! And to think you conquered your camera shyness on top of it all!"

"Though I'm pretty sure Mr. Fetlock's not going to be happy about this," the Matter-Horn said, levitating the black shards into view.

"Whenever *did* you get so brave?" Radiance asked.

Saddle Rager shrugged. "It was simple, really. All I did was think about…"

" *Discord's out! Discord's out!* "

"Zapp?" the Matter-Horn said, pressing down on her commlink. "What's going on?"

There was a sound of Zapp taking a deep breath. " *I'm at the museum. The statue of Discord…it really* is *Discord! And he's out! He's out!* "

"What?" the Matter-Horn said.

" *What?!* " Mistress Mare-velous screamed through the device.

"What?" Saddle Rager said in disbelief.

" *Cool!* " came Fili-Second's voice. " *We've never had to fight a* god *before!* "

" *Is Saddle Rager with ya, Zapp?!* " Mare-velous demanded.

"Saddle Rager's with us on Rover Street," Radiance said. "The Great and Powerful Trixie had…"

" *Then how did he get out?!* " Mare-velous said.

" *I'm not sure!* " Zapp exclaimed. " *Mr. Fetlock and I were just arguing and then the statue broke and there he was! In the flesh! Wait. Do gods have flesh?* "

" *But if Fluttershy was nowhere near him, then how…?* "

She quickly stopped herself, but too late for her question to escape her colleagues' notice. Saddle Rager's eyes had gone wide and the Matter-Horn did not appear pleased.

" *Hey, what's with the suddenly awkward pause?* " Fili-Second asked.

"Mare-velous," the alicorn said slowly, "is there something you would like to share with the class?"

There was a gulp. " *Uh…* "

" *Demeter told her that Fluttershy is Discord's Vassal who's destined to set him free, happy?* " Zapp said.

" *Rainbow!* " Mare-velous hollered. " *I mean Zapp, er… Ugh! I never know what to call ya when we're alone!* "

Saddle Rager was frozen, unsure of what to say. The Matter-Horn was scowling hard.

"And just *how* long have you had this information?" she demanded.

There was a pause. " *When we had to defeat the Sirens…* " Mare-velous started to say.

"And you're only telling us this *now* ?!" the Matter-Horn yelled, her wings shooting up in anger.

"We don't have time for this!" Radiance said. "That ruffian is on the loose, remember?"

The alicorn took a deep breath. "Right. Zapp, do you have a visual on Discord?"

" *Yeah, he's right…oh no, wait. He's flying away.* "

" *What?!* " Mare-velous exclaimed. " *Follow him, ya ninny!* "

" *Don't call me names! I'm going!* "

There was a *whoosh* sound.

"Keep an eye on him and stop him from whatever trouble he causes," the Matter-Horn said. "We'll catch up."

" *Fluttershy can't come,* " Mare-velous said.

"W-Why not?" Saddle Rager said, finally speaking up.

" *You're his Vassal. The first thing he might come lookin' for is you.* "

" *And his Chaos Amulet!* " Zapp said. " *When the statue was found, the amulet was removed from it and put on display in another part of the museum.* "

"Zapp," the Matter-Horn said, "go back to the museum and tell Mr. Fetlock to secure that amulet."

" *But you told me to…* "

"We might not stand a chance against Discord *at all* if he gets that amulet!"

Zapp let out a heavy sigh.

"Now," the Matter-Horn said, turning to Radiance, "who wants to go fight a god?"

Ponies gaped in bewilderment at the strange serpentine creature flying through the streets of Maretropolis, unsure of whether or not to run. Discord was glancing around at the tall skyscrapers.

"They've certainly upped the building codes since I was last here," he said. "Athena must certainly be proud."

With a snap of his fingers, the skyscrapers were instantly turned to cheese. There were screams as the cheese started to sag.

"Yes," Discord said, nodding. "Taller buildings were certainly a *gouda* idea." He stopped suddenly. "Ooh!"

He zipped down to a building he had not yet transformed. He pressed his face to the window of a bridal shop. His eyes focused on a particular white wedding dress on a mannequin. It was puffed up like a pastry, with a long translucent train and veil to match.

"So this is what ponies wear to their weddings nowadays, hmm?"

He poked his paw through the glass as if it were nonexistent. The clerk screamed as his lion arm stretched across the room, grabbed the dress and snapped it back through the window. In a flash, the dress was on his person.

"I don't know," he said, turning around. "Not exactly my color." Snapping his fingers, he changed the dress from white to orange. "Perfect! Now if only we had some…" He spotted a flower shop. "Flowers!"

He surprised the florist by lifting the display window up and snatching up a bouquet of lilies and chrysanthemums. He slammed down the window, shattering the glass and held the bouquet upside-down in his paw. Next to the flower shop was Bray Jewelers. Upon spying a particular article of jewelry, Discord skipped all subtlety and just broke through the window, setting the alarms off, to swipe the lovely piece.

"Excellent," he said, tucking the jewel away. "Now all that's missing is…"

He turned upon hearing a mare shriek. A yellow pegasus with a pink mane was flying away.

"Fluttershy!"

Stretching out his tail, he grabbed the mare and brought her to his face. She twisted in his grasp as she tried to escape. He frowned as he got a better look at her.

"Brown eyes," he said with a disappointed sigh. "Wrong one."

He snapped back his tail, tossing the mare across the street. Fortunately, having wings, she was able to fly away before she could hit something. Discord then caught a glimpse of another yellow mare in the window of an apartment building. Her back was to him as she was brushing her pink mane at her vanity. Grinning, Discord reached his paw inside and closed it around the mare's waist. She let out a yelped as she was suddenly pulled out of her bedroom.

Discord noticed his error immediately as she looked her over.

"Shoot," he grumbled. "You're not even a pegasus. Oh well. Any idea how to get to Rover Street?"

"Put me down!" the mare screamed.

He shrugged. "As you wish."

He tossed the mare over his shoulder. Sadly, this mare did not have the wings nor the magic to save herself. Covering her eyes with her hooves, she prepared to hit the sidewalk. Zapp swooped down in time to catch her and set her down safely on the sidewalk.

"Yeesh," Zapp said, putting her hooves on her hips. "I knew the guy was evil. I didn't think he was *sloppy* ."

As she took her pendant in her hoof, Discord tugged on the collar of his dress. "Is it just me? Or is the mortal world a lot warmer than I

remember?" He squinted up at the sun. "Ya planning to burn these mortals alive, Apollo? I always knew you'd crack one day. What we need is some shade."

As he raised his fingers, dark clouds started forming overhead. He looked at his fingers in confusion.

"Odd," he said softly.

Just then, a bolt of lightning struck his rear, making him jump. Now, there are few things that can actually hurt a god. Lightning was not usually one of them, unless it had come directly from…

"Zeus," Discord said, rolling his eyes as he massaged his posterior. "Figures. Just when I'm starting to have fun, who should come to crash the party? None other than…"

But as he turned around, he was surprised to be met with a costumed mare with a seriously bad haircut he could respect. Raising his eyebrow, he said, "… *not* Zeus?"

"Break time's over, Discord!" Zapp said, flapping her wings as she brought her bolt up higher. "Once my friends get here, you're going back in that statue where you belong!"

As he cocked his head, Discord's eyes fixated on the pendant in her hoof. "Well. *This* is certainly new." He rubbed his chin in interest. "How is it that a mortal mare is able to wield Zeus' Lightning Bolt? What are you? His demigod daughter?" He smirked. "His latest mistress, perhaps?"

She gagged. "I'm no one's mistress and I'm no one's daughter!" She paused. "Okay, I am *some pony's* daughter but…" She shook her head. "It doesn't matter who I am! All you need to know is that I'm the mare who's gonna fry ya!"

Discord leaped out of the way as another bolt of lightning struck behind him. "You may have Zeus' powers," he said, raising his claw, "but you're still no match for me."

Before he could snap his fingers, a golden rope closed around his wrist. "What the…?"

He cried out as he was suddenly pulled to the ground. Looking up, he saw Mistress Mare-velous standing over him, the rope hovering at her side.

"How 'bout a little Zeus *and* Demeter?" Mare-velous said.

He stared at the rope. "What? Was there a Free Divine Relics Giveaway I missed?"

"I'll be the one askin' the questions here," Mare-velous said, stepping on his claw. "How did ya get out?"

Discord smirked. "You may have Demeter's rope…"

Something tapped her on the shoulder. Snapping her head around, Mare-velous saw Discord's eagle claw hovering beside her. Gasping, she looked down at the rope and saw Discord's arm was now handless. He grinned as he proudly stood up. His claw then flew up and snapped back into place.

"…but you're not as clever as her," he said, flexing his fingers.

"Hello!"

Discord yelped as he suddenly found a pink mare in a white suit perched on his shoulder.

"By the way," Fili-Second said, " *love* the dress!"

He summoned a flyswatter to shoo her off. Before he could make contact, she zoomed down to the ground. He was amazed at her lightning speed.

"And what are you?" he asked, crossing his arms. "Some spawn of Hermes?"

"I ain't no spawn to no one, buster!" Fili-Second shouted.

She zipped up to him and started punching his stomach really fast. To Discord, her punches had no effect. He simply watched her with a yawn.

"Clearly," Discord said, picking her up by her head, "while you do seem to possess unique abilities for a mortal, they are of no divine origin whatsoever."

Another lightning strike caused him to drop her. He glared at the singed fluff on the tip of his tail.

"That's it," Discord said, turning to Zapp. "Since you like playing with electricity so much, I sentence you to an eternity as an electric eel!"

He snapped his fingers and in a flash, Zapp's mane was thin and sleek. It appeared to be in the shape of a squiggly eel sticking up from her head. Discord looked at his fingers in confusion.

"That's…not what I meant to do."

He snapped his fingers again, but all it did was make Zapp's tail shaped like an eel. Discord's eyes widened as he felt around his neck.

"My amulet!" He padded his paw and claw around his body. "Where is my amulet?!"

Before he could search any further, he found himself imprisoned in a glowing pink birdcage.

"And for your crimes against fashion," Radiance said as she marched into view, "I sentence you to an eternity as a canary with no fashion sense!"

Discord squinted at the unicorn. "Speaking of fashion, is that what ponies are wearing nowadays?" His face lit up with inspiration. "Well, if I *must* keep up with the times…"

Swiftly, he ripped off his dress and veil, revealing an orange jumpsuit underneath. On its chest was a big red "D," which matched his red cape and mask.

"Ooh," Radiance said in admiration. "Those colors really *do* match your complexion. However, is the mask really necessary if we already know who you are?"

"Is that what this thing is for?" Discord asked, tearing off his mask. "I thought it just looked cool." He tossed it aside. "Oh well. Now that I'm properly dressed for the occasion…"

He gripped the glowing pink bars and snapped them as if they were toothpicks. Radiance's jaw dropped as he slithered out of the cage through the hole he had made.

"But the…" Radiance stammered, pointing. "How did…?"

"God of Chaos!" Discord cried, flying above the heroes. "Hello? You really think these little parlor tricks are going to get the best of *me* ?"

He didn't see the ice beam coming. He landed on the ground encased in a giant ice cube. The Matter-Horn fluttered above him.

"Nope," she said with a smirk, "but that might."

Just as she said this, something glowed red inside the ice cube. Discord broke through the ice, his body covered in flames. The Matter-Horn flew back in alarm.

"An alicorn?" Discord said as the flames extinguished. "Seriously? Those things are even rare amongst us gods!"

Shaking off her shock, the Matter-Horn narrowed her eyes. "Then this should be a rare experience for you."

She shot a laser beam, but Discord surprised them all again by splitting his head in half to let the beam through and then reformed his head again.

"Uh, how exactly are we supposed to beat this guy?" Fili-Second asked.

"Zapp," the Matter-Horn whispered to the pegasus. "You studied Gracian mythology. How do we defeat him?"

"Yeah," Zapp said, rubbing the back of her neck awkwardly. "We'd kinda need all twelve of the Olympian Gods' Gifts to put him back in stone."

The alicorn gritted her teeth together. "What?"

"Zeus' pet is right, Ali-Horn," Discord said, hovering upside-down. "Unless you've got ten other divine relics handy, I'm pretty much indestructible." He flipped onto his belly. "What, were the gods too scared to face me themselves that they sent a bunch of wannabe demigods to do their dirty work?"

As he laughed, Mare-velous tightened her rope. "I *really* don't like this fella."

"We might not be able to destroy you," the Matter-Horn said, " *or* turn you back to stone, but that doesn't mean we can't stop you from destroying Maretropolis! Power Ponies! Hit him with everything you've got!"

As they charged at him, Discord simply cracked his knuckles. "This should be amusing."

While the battle raged on, Saddle Rager was hiding behind a mailbox. Her teammates had told her to stay away, but she couldn't resist coming to see him. After seeing him in a frozen state for over a decade, and only hearing his voice in her dreams, she yearned to see him in person.

His appearance was no surprise. She knew every inch of his body. However, it was so different seeing him in color. He was like a patchwork quilt of different animals. Having cared for many different types of animals, the sight was impressive.

The way he acted as the God of Chaos was not what she had expected. He was so lively, so flamboyant, so…juvenile. It was the complete opposite of how he had behaved in her dreams. She had mixed feelings watching him battle her friends. So far, it seemed like he hadn't done anything *too* destructive. Was attacking him really fair?

"Look, this is fun and all," Discord said, yawning as he created a hole in his stomach to dodge another one of Matter-Horn's rays, "but I really must be going. You heroes wouldn't happen to know where I can find Sweet Feathers' Veterinary Clinic, would you?"

"Fluttershy's clinic?" Fili-Second said. "Oh sure, just go two blocks down, around the corner and then another five blocks down!"

The other Power Ponies shot her angry looks. Fili-Second put her hoof in her mouth.

Discord's facial expression changed into one of elation. "You know Fluttershy?" He snatched Fili-Second by the tail and raised her to his face. "Good. Then you can help me find her!"

Zapp's mane frizzed with sparks. "You leave Fluttershy alone, you monster!"

The storm cloud above her head became bigger, and the pegasus was blazing with electricity. Gasping, Saddle Rager jumped out from behind the mailbox and shouted, "Zapp, no, stop!"

Discord's ears perked up and his head turned in her direction. "Fluttershy?"

While he was distracted, Demeter's Lasso looped around him. With a strong tug, his arms were pulled to his sides, forcing him to drop Fili-Second. Discord followed as the rope dragged him to the ground. He heaved a heavy sigh.

"Well, heroes, looks like you caught me. Question is, since you can't turn me to stone, what are you going to do with me?"

"Yeah, partner," Mare-velous said, turning to the Matter-Horn. "What *are* we gonna do with him? He's a *god* .We can't just take him to jail or Balkham like the rest."

The Matter-Horn rubbed her chin in thought. "You're not gonna like this."

Since I started my new job, I haven't had much time to write. It's gonna take a while to settle into this new routine and put in time for writing.

I've been planning this saga for months. I had SO many

different possible routes this could take. Eventually I decided on one where Fluttershy is NOT present for Discord's escape...for reasons which I will reveal later.

Yes, the Trixie plot is a tribute to Mojo Jojo's scheme in *Powerpuff Girls* . I sometimes watch that show among other superhero stuff for inspiration.

Heart of Stone: Part 2

" *Trust is like a mirror, you can fix it if it's broken, but you can still see the crack in that mother f—er's reflection."*

- Lady Gaga

"There is *no* way this is gonna work!" Mare-velous said.

"There's nowhere else to put him," the Masked Matter-Horn said as she pressed the keypad on the wall. "If we keep him here at headquarters, we'll be able to keep an eye on him, and these magical security measures, courtesy of Sparkle Labs, should be enough to keep him in check."

Mare-velous looked over to the god, still bound up by Demeter's Lasso while sitting in a padded cell.

"I must say," Discord said, bouncing on the cushioned floor, "this is *much* cozier than my last prison."

"Isn't this a bit overkill?" Mare-velous whispered to the Matter-Horn. "I mean the rope seems to have made him harmless enough already."

"This is just for added measure," the Matter-Horn said. "This force-field is laced with enchantments to ward off any evil spirits." She glanced briefly at their divine prisoner. "I think the God of Chaos counts as an evil spirit."

"You flatter me," Discord said with a grin.

Mare-velous shook her head. "I don't know what scares me more. The fact that we're keepin' the ancient embodiment of all things evil in our headquarters, or the fact that ya already had one of these evil-wardin' cells handy."

"And…done," the Matter-Horn said as she punched in the last key.

A transparent magenta wall materialized over the cell's opening.

"The force-field's active behind the walls, above the ceiling and beneath the floor too," the Matter-Horn said. "Only way in is if one of us punches in the correct passcode. The keys are set to only register the hoof prints of us, our teammates, and Humdrum's claw print."

"Impressive magic," Discord said, staring at the force-field. "Who did you study with? Hecate? Circe? Calypso?"

"Celestia, actually," the Matter-Horn said.

He blinked. "Who?"

The alicorn opened her mouth in astonishment. She was prepared to rant when Mare-velous put a hoof on her shoulder.

"He was banished *before* the princesses were born, remember?" Mare-velous whispered.

The Matter-Horn sighed. "Right. He probably doesn't even know about the Vassals…"

"What are you girls whispering about?" Discord said, his childish grin remaining. "You talking about my astonishing good looks?"

Mare-velous glared at him. "I'll bet he *does* know a thing or two about divine Vassals after what he did to Fluttershy!"

"Aha!" Like a snake, he slithered closer to the force-field. "You *do* know who Fluttershy is! Is she around here?"

Mare-velous stepped up to the force-field, her muzzle just an inch away. "Maybe first you could tell us why ya put that curse on her!"

He blinked. "Curse?"

"What kind of sick creature are ya, puttin' that kinda burden on a tiny little filly! Do ya have any idea what ya did to her?!"

He stared at her for a while, then his eyes widened. "I *did* hurt her, didn't I?" He hung his head. "Oh, I *wish* she hadn't touched that amulet! But how could I have warned her? I wasn't exactly in a position to!" He looked up at the heroes with an expression of worry. "How bad were her injuries? Was she deformed? I didn't mean to hurt her! It was an accident!"

Mistress Mare-velous blinked in confusion. "Accident?"

The Masked Matter-Horn appeared to be just as perplexed. "You mean to say…you have no idea what you did to Fluttershy?"

Discord shook his head. "Whatever I did to her, it was unintentional. Now will some pony tell me what exactly it was I did to her?"

The two heroes shared a look and decided not to press this question further.

"How did you escape?" the Matter-Horn asked.

He smiled. "Fluttershy freed me."

"Fluttershy was nowhere near ya when ya got out," Mare-velous said. "How'd she free ya?"

Laying his head down on the floor so that he was glancing sideways at the mares, he said, "Like the prophecy says, she accepted my gifts."

Mare-velous eyed the rope. "What else does the prophecy say?"

"Oh, you don't want to hear it from me. It's really better when you hear Apollo say it. I should know." He chuckled. "I was there."

The rope tightened around his waist. "Just answer the question."

He only laughed. "You think that's going to hurt me? True, I cannot lie in this." He looked down at his lying form. "Well, I can't lie in *one* way, anyway. But this squeezing thing is only going to give me a more slender figure. After all, it's not as if there's any air for you to cut off."

The Matter-Horn sighed. "He's right. There's not much we can do to hurt him."

"Fine," Mare-velous said with a shrug. " *Don't* tell us how ya got out. At least tell us why you're so interested in Fluttershy."

His grin widened and his eyelids drooped. "Why *shouldn't* I be interested in the mare who rescued me from the dark depths of my stone prison? I merely want to thank her for all she's done to me. Is that so wrong?" He tilted his head so he could look at them right-side-up. "Would you do me the courtesy of bringing her here so that I may thank her properly?"

After a quick glance at the Matter-Horn, Mare-velous said, "We'll see."

As they turned their backs to walk down the hall, Discord called, "I know that line! Zeus used it on me every time I asked for my own holiday! Guess what? It never happened!"

The rest of the team was in the main lounge. Humdrum sat at the monitors, keeping an eye on Discord in his cell. Saddle Rager sat on the couch, her eyes also fixated on the god. Radiance was polishing her bracelets while Fili-Second was gouging down on forty carrot dogs.

In the corner of the room, Zapp was pacing around while talking on her cell phone.

"Yeah, I know. I *told* Mr. Fetlock to…" She winced. "Boss, I mean Daring, I… Yes, we have him secured." She paused. "Ugh, he's *not* gonna like that." Another pause. "Any ideas on how we can…?" As she listened, she shook her head. "We're screwed then. Well, call us if you can find anything else."

"I take it Daring Do doesn't have much helpful information?" the Matter-Horn asked as she and Mare-velous walked in.

Zapp hung up the phone. "She's gonna do some digging in her books, but like we already figured out, we can't turn him back to

stone without all twelve of the Olympian Gods' Gifts."

"But we can't just leave him in that cell either!" Mare-velous exclaimed, pointing at the screen. "I'd like to have my rope back at some point!"

"We may not have a choice," the Matter-Horn said, "unless there's some other way we can contain him."

"What about that Chaos Amulet he keeps raving about?" Radiance asked.

"Despite being a god," Zapp said, "Discord's powers in the mortal world are restricted. The Amulet of Chaos was given to him by… actually no pony knows who gave it to him. But it's supposed to give him unlimited control over the mortal realm. We're sure lucky he didn't find it at the museum."

"Even so," the Matter-Horn said, "we may have to put that amulet under tight security. It's risky having it on public display."

Zapp cringed. "Mr. Fetlock's not gonna like that. It's bad enough we already broke the Head of Anubis and then another one of the exhibits came to life today."

"He'll probably change his mind once Twilight Sparkle has a little chat with him."

Saddle Rager looked down at her hooves. "Did…did he…say anything about me?"

Mare-velous bit her lip. She still felt guilty for keeping the secret of her roommate being Discord's Vassal. Since she had repeated Demeter's message, Mare-velous could feel the tension arising between her teammates.

"He says you were the one who set him free," the Matter-Horn said.

"I didn't mean to!" Saddle Rager insisted. "I mean…I didn't even know how…he had talked about it…"

"What?"

Saddle Rager blushed. "He, um…he's been speaking to me in my dreams for a while now."

The Matter-Horn put her hoof to her head. "We *really* need to organize some trust exercises or something. This team seems to be lacking in it immensely!"

"I didn't think they meant anything!" Saddle Rager twiddled her hooves. "He…he was asking me to set him free. I asked him how, and he said I had to 'accept his gifts.'"

Mare-velous' eyes widened. "That's exactly what he told us!"

"But I don't know what that means!"

Radiance gasped. "I think I do! Saddle Rager, you remember after you defeated Trixie and talked to the reporters? You told them that you had accepted your powers from Discord!"

The Matter-Horn stiffened. "Zapp, when did you start noticing the crack in Discord's statue?"

Scratching her head, Zapp said, "Let's see…Mr. Fetlock pointed it out around the time we fought the Shadow King, and the security footage showed it springing up a week before that, so…" As she trailed off, her face became blank. "Not too long after…Fluttershy joined the team."

"So if you think about it," Fili-Second said, sitting upside-down on the couch, "this is *our* fault!"

"What do you mean, Fili?" Radiance asked.

"I mean we were spending all this time trying to build up Fluttershy's confidence and convince her to use her powers for good and accept that scary part of herself and get her to love herself and accept that this was a part of her when all it was doing was bringing Discord closer and closer to his escape which makes sense if the statue started cracking when Fluttershy became Saddle Rager and then burst open when she finally accepted her freaky powers so Discord wouldn't have escaped if we hadn't been supportive teammates." She rolled her eyes. "Duh!"

They were silent for a long while. Mistress Mare-velous slapped her forehead with her hoof.

"All this time," she said quietly, "I thought bringin' ya out of yerr shell would do ya some good. But it was just makin' that gosh darn prophecy come true. Didn't even matter that I was keepin' ya from that statue!"

"Don't blame yourself, Applejack," Saddle Rager said. "You were only trying to help me."

"She's right, Mare-velous," the Matter-Horn said. "From what I know about Gracian mythology…err, history, I should say; trying to escape Fate only seals it."

Zapp huffed. "What's the point of making prophecies if it's just gonna happen no matter what you do?"

"Well," the Matter-Horn said, "we at least have one advantage over Discord." She turned to Saddle Rager. "He doesn't seem to know that he had cursed you."

Saddle Rager blinked. "He…doesn't?"

The alicorn shook her head. "When we asked why he had cursed you, he didn't seem to know what we were talking about."

"And he can't lie with Demeter's Rope around him," Mare-velous said. "He said when ya touched his amulet, he was scared that it had hurt ya, that he didn't mean what he did." She spoke quietly. "Hate to say it, but I believe him."

"But how can he *not* know?" Fili-Second asked. "Isn't he a god or something?"

"Not *all* gods are all-knowing," Zapp said. "If that were so, they would've put Discord someplace where *no pony* would find him."

"Not even Demeter knows everything," Mare-velous admitted begrudgingly. "Back when her daughter Persephone was taken, she had no way of knowin' that Hades had her."

"So if he doesn't know about the curse, he must not know about Saddle Rager either." The Matter-Horn tapped her chin. "Have you ever mentioned the Power Ponies to Discord when he was stone?"

Saddle Rager took a moment to think. "I…must have brought you up a couple of times, but…n-no. I don't think…I don't think I ever told him I was a superhero. There were always other ponies present at the museum, I couldn't risk being overheard."

"Maybe it's best that he doesn't know, for now."

"Oh, most certainly," Radiance said. "Take it from some pony who has been in a dangerous situation with a villain. It is one thing to have a villain interested in one side of you. Imagine what power that villain would have over *both* sides of you!"

"V-Villain?" Saddle Rager stammered. "T-That's a bit…h-harsh, don't you think?"

Everyone turned to her in shock.

"You're kidding, right?" Zapp said. "You're talking about the guy who took over the world two thousand odd years ago!"

"But that was in the past," Saddle Rager said. "Maybe…maybe all that time in stone made him reconsider things."

"Even if that were possible," Radiance said, "you forget the mayhem he caused in town just after he was released."

Circling her hoof in the floor, Saddle Rager said, "I don't know if 'mayhem' is the right word for it."

"He was throwing ponies across town!" Zapp shouted.

"He robbed several elegant department stores!" Radiance said. "And broke many fashion codes!"

"Not to mention he's *really* annoying!" Fili-Second exclaimed, crossing her hooves.

"And he'll do much worse if he gets his paw and claw on that

amulet," Mare-velous said. "But like I said, we can't hold him in there forever."

"Unless he can tell us of some other way to imprison him," the Matter-Horn said.

"That should be easy with Demeter's Lasso of Truth," Fili-Second said.

"Not really," Mare-velous said. "Just because he can't tell an untruth, doesn't mean he can't hide anything. When we interrogated him, he kept dodgin' our questions with other truths, except the truths we were lookin' for."

"We asked him about the prophecy," the Matter-Horn said, "but rather than tell us what it was, he said it was better we heard it from Apollo."

"We asked him about why he was so interested in Fluttershy, he said why *wouldn't* he be interested in the mare who freed him? He says he just wants to thank her, but," Mare-velous said, rubbing her chin, "what if there's something else that he's just not tellin' us?"

Zapp shrugged. "Discord is famed for his mind games. He even managed to confuse the Goddess of Wisdom, Athena, a couple of times."

"What if *I* talked to him?"

For the second time that day, everyone looked at Saddle Rager in shock. She shrunk back from the sudden attention.

"I mean," she said, clearing her throat, "he *wants* to talk to me, right? Maybe…he'll cooperate if we…give him what he wants?"

They all stared at her for a while.

"She *does* make a good point," Fili-Second said.

"If you can get him to trust you, Fluttershy," the Matter-Horn said, "he might reveal his weaknesses. Or, if he knows, the location of the other Gods' Gifts."

Mare-velous shook her head. "I don't like the idea. Like Zapp said, Discord is known for his mind games. Who's to say her interrogatin' him won't have the opposite effect?"

"I can do it," Saddle Rager said boldly. "After all, from what I've seen in my dreams, he seems to trust me already."

"You just can't let him know you're Saddle Rager," the Matter-Horn said, "or else he'll use that knowledge against you." She glanced at Mare-velous. "And in case Discord should try anything, we'll be watching on the monitors and listening through our commlinks."

"I still don't like it," Mare-velous said, looking at her roommate, "but I see no other options."

"Hooray!" Fili-Second cried, throwing her hoof around Saddle Rager. "Go get him, Clarice!"

Radiance blinked. "Who's Clarice?"

"Yes, well," Saddle Rager said, looking down. "It's probably a good thing I managed to get out of work for the rest of the day."

"How *did* you manage to get out of work anyway?" Zapp asked.

"I just told Doctor Fauna that I'd been turned into a dog and that the experience was a bit traumatic."

Fili-Second laughed. "This is probably the *only* town where a wacky excuse like that can actually work!"

The elevator doors opened to the hallway with the holding cells. For a while, Fluttershy just stood there in her veterinarian uniform, hesitant to go forward. The doors automatically closing finally convinced her.

Holding out her hoof, Fluttershy stopped the doors and stepped into the hallway. She stood frozen as the doors shut behind her. She stared down the hall, knowing that Discord's cell was at its very end.

She was incredibly nervous. Not because she was about to meet an all-powerful god who was possibly evil, but because she realized this would be the first time the two of them would meet face-to-face.

For years, she had spoken to him with no reply. He couldn't even see her. He had been able to speak to her in her dreams, but even then, neither one could see the other's face. And now, she would see him, and he would see her, and they would actually engage in conversation.

" *It's okay, Fluttershy,* " the Matter-Horn said through the commlink. " *We're right here.* "

But she couldn't hear her, for she was too deep in thought.

What if he's not what I thought he was? What if he'd been playing with my head all this time? What if he doesn't like me anymore once he sees me?

"I know you're there."

Fluttershy jumped upon hearing Discord's voice. It was just as low and haunting as it had been in her dreams.

"Come closer," he said softly. "There's no need to be afraid."

His tone was kind enough to compel Fluttershy's hooves to step forward. Yet she still hesitated.

"Please, my dear," he said with a hint of sadness. "Come to me. Let me see your face." She still did not move. "It's alright. I won't hurt you. I *couldn't* hurt you even if I wanted to. And I never will."

Gulping, Fluttershy slowly walked down the hall, her hoofsteps echoing with a light *ping!* She approached the cell at the end, its entrance covered by a magenta force-field, and turned to face the creature inside.

The moment he saw her, his red pupils dilated so that the yellows of his eyes were nothing but thin ribbons.

"F-Fluttershy?" he said in a voice of astonishment and wonder.

Quivering her lip, she replied, "Y-Yes."

His body was still as his eyes raked up and down her body, drinking in the sight of her. At first, he felt confusion, for the Fluttershy who had spoken to him had expressed concerns about being monstrous, but by pony standards, she looked completely ordinary. On the other hand, he was relieved that he hadn't disfigured her. So then why was she so afraid of herself?

She hadn't lied about her features. Her mane was indeed pink, her coat was indeed yellow, and her eyes were indeed teal. For the longest moment, those teal eyes were locked on his.

He found no flaw in her appearance. No wrinkle, no scar, no freckle, not even a mosquito bite or split end. Normally, something like this would irk him and he would do something to make this perfect being *im* perfect, like mess up her mane or change the color of her eyes to something outlandish like orange. Something this flawless should not be permitted to exist.

Then, in a sudden burst of shyness, her head lowered, her gaze directing to the floor as a thick lock of her mane fell over her eye. Her hoof moved to sweep that stray lock behind her ear. Discord watched in interest as she did all this slowly and gracefully.

There. There was the flaw he'd been looking for. Despite having such a perfect appearance that would be aesthetically pleasing to any being other than himself, she did not think she was a being worth admiring. Not knowing that she was flawless was her flaw.

It was a conundrum he found delightfully charming.

She looked back up at him and her cheeks took on an adorable shade of pink. Discord's wings would have fluttered had they not been constricted by the rope.

"Um," Fluttershy said, rubbing her foreleg awkwardly. "You're… um…you're kind of…"

Discord finally blinked and quickly shook his head. "F-Forgive me for staring, but…" He leaned closer towards the force-field. "I…I've just

dreamed of this moment when…when I'd see you at last."

She glanced to the side. "I'm…sorry if you're disappointed."

"No!" Realizing he'd said that a little too loudly, he cleared his throat. "N-No. Quite the contrary, in fact."

His lower jaw hung open, and there was silence again.

"I…I spent so many years thinking of what I should say…how I should…but I…" After a pause, he laughed. "Congratulations, my dear. It's a rare achievement to strike a god speechless."

A smile tugged at her lips, and Discord could've sworn her face became brighter.

"G-Guess I'm not the only one who's," she said, slowly locking eyes with him again, "n-nervous."

He grinned too. "What's there for *you* to be nervous about? You're only meeting the most powerful god in the cosmos." The rope tightened around his waist. "Okay, so maybe the *second* most powerful god." It squeezed further. "Okay, okay! In the top ten at least!"

Fluttershy giggled softly, making Discord's ears perk up.

"What?" she asked, noticing his staring again.

"N-Nothing," he said, "it's just…I don't believe I've heard you laugh before."

She blushed further. "I…can't remember the last time I laughed."

" *You're doing great, Fluttershy,* " the Matter-Horn's voice said in her ear. Fluttershy had almost forgotten the others were listening in. " *Keep talking, but keep it casual.* "

"I…" Fluttershy said, shaking her head. "I have so many questions."

"As do I," Discord said. "Perhaps you could start by telling me what year it is. It's hard to tell how much time passes when you're trapped

in stone."

"It's the two thousandth year of Princess Celestia and Princess Luna's reign."

He blinked. "Princesses? What princesses?"

"You…don't know?"

He shrugged. "I've been in that statue for at least two thousand years, apparently."

"Well," she said, twiddling her hooves, "I don't know much history, but…the story is that once the ponies started learning how to take care of nature all on their own, with the pegasi controlling the weather and the earth ponies tending to the crops and all, the Gods of Olympus decided that the mortals didn't need them anymore. So they retired."

Discord's eyes widened. "So…the Gods of Olympus…aren't in power anymore?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"Interesting," he said in thought. "That would explain why Zeus' Bolt and Demeter's Lasso were in possession of some renegade mortals."

"That's the thing," she said. "Even though the gods had retired, they still figured the ponies might still require their help every now and then, so they gave their symbols of power to mortals they deemed worthy."

She paused. "There was also the matter of bringing forth day and night. While unicorns had the magic to do that task, it was still a job that was too taxing on them, as it required a lot of magic and many unicorns to raise and lower the sun and moon. So together, Apollo and Artemis created two alicorn sisters, Princess Celestia who would bring forth the day, and Princess Luna to bring forth the night."

"So the Olympians' symbols of power are all scattered across the

world, eh? And the gods themselves no longer involve themselves in mortal affairs." Discord smirked. " *Very* interesting."

" *Might wanna change the topic there, Sugar,* " Mare-velous said through the commlink. " *I think ya may have given him a little* too *much information* ."

"Oh, um…" She looked down the hallway. "How'd you know it was me in here?"

He leaned forward. "I'd know the sound of your hooffall anywhere. You've visited me so many times."

She glanced down at her hooves. "I…wasn't sure if you were listening."

"Oh, I was listening alright." The rest he said in a low whisper. "And I held onto every word." He shook his head. "I never quite understood why you doubted yourself so often. I know it's a common trait amongst you mortals, but seeing you…I just can't understand how some pony so beautiful can be so unsure of herself."

Fluttershy allowed her mane to fall over her face so he wouldn't see how red it was. "You…don't have to be polite."

He huffed. "Believe me. I'm the *least* polite being I know. This stupid rope's just forcing me to be honest." As his eyelids drooped, he said, "Though it would be hard for me to deny the brilliance of the goddess before me."

" *Don't fall for his flattery, Fluttershy!* " Zapp exclaimed.

" *Yeah!* " Fili-Second said. " *Even if you* are *totally drop-dead gorgeous!* "

" *I agree, darling,* " Radiance said. " *I've envied how well kept your mane is ever since we first met! What shampoo do you use? And* please *don't say Tangler's.* "

" *I think you're missin' the point here, Radiance!* " Mare-velous hollered.

" *Not that you're not pretty, Fluttershy!* " Zapp said insistently.

" *Is it a store-bought brand or some all-natural concoction you whipped up yourself?* " Radiance asked.

" *What does it matter?!* " Mare-velous shouted. " *Shampoo is shampoo! Ugh! Now ya got* me *talkin' nonsense!* "

As they prattled on, Fluttershy turned so that the ear with the commlink was facing away from Discord.

"We've talked enough about me," she said, casually taking the earpiece out and slipping it into the pocket of her lab coat. "I'd like to know about you." She swept her mane behind her ear. "After all, I… never got to hear from you in all that time."

"Oh, perfectly understandable," Discord said, throwing back his head in an attempted mane flip. "I *am* a fascinating specimen." He noticed her stare. "Hello? Truth-telling rope?"

She couldn't help but giggle a bit. "I just…wanted to know if…what they say about you…is true."

He shrugged. "Depends on what you mean. Do they say I'm the handsomest, suavest, irresistible god alive?" He looked down at his bounds. "I'd flex my muscles, but…"

"That's not what I meant. Are you," she said, biting her lip, "at least… *were* you…evil?"

His smile vanished, and Fluttershy could've sworn she saw fear behind his eyes.

"A-Again," he stammered. "It depends on your definition of evil."

Ashamed of her question, Fluttershy gazed down at the floor. "What I mean is…when you took over the world, did you… *hurt* ponies?"

For a long while, his expression was unreadable, his gaze never leaving her. Then he glanced to the side.

"I will not lie." Twisting against the rope, he said, " *Cannot* lie."

She closed her eyes. "I see."

When he looked back at her, he felt a twinge of pain at seeing her so dejected. "I wish I could tell you that what they say about me is wrong, that I'm not a monster." He sighed. "But yes, I…have hurt ponies in the past. Donkeys and cows and minotaurs too."

"But why?"

He paused as if to think about it. "Don't you wonder why there aren't many temples erected to me? Why ponies only turn to me when all the other gods refuse to answer their prayers? Why I'm that final act of desperation rather than their first choice?"

She looked up at him. "N-No, I…had no idea."

"Well, it's because they all hate me."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, they can't *all* have hated you. You are a god, after all."

Rolling his eyes, he said, "Being a god doesn't necessarily mean you are *liked* . It's merely a title that means you're immortal and have power over the forces of nature and guarantees you only a handful of followers who are really just mojo in the coco or some angsty teenagers going through a nemo phase." His lip turned upward. "At least I think that's how you translate it. I really do appreciate how chaotic and confusing your modern Ponish is."

Looking him over, she asked, "So…you lashed out on the mortal world because…no pony appreciated you?"

He nodded. "I figured if I ruled over them, they would have reason to respect me."

"But…then they'd also have reason to fear you."

"Yeah." He hung his head. "But at least I wouldn't be ignored."

She rubbed her foreleg. "And are you…still thinking about taking over the world?"

He paused. "As tempting as the idea is, lately I've had something," he said, his eyes focusing on her, "else on my mind."

"Really?" Fluttershy said, her heart filling with hope. "That's wonderful! What is it?"

He glanced around the hallway. "You wouldn't happen to know where my Amulet of Chaos is, would you?"

Frowning, she turned her head away from him.

"You don't know or you just won't tell?"

She sighed. "Honestly, I was hoping you wouldn't ask that."

"Hey, hey, hey! I just wanna take back what is rightfully mine. That amulet *was* made for me, after all."

"True," she said, facing him with a stern expression, "but it's also what helped you take over the world, and what turned me into…"

She quickly put her hoof to her mouth. This action did not escape Discord's notice.

Taking a calming breath, Fluttershy said, "I may not have been around when you took over the world, but I know that amulet is nothing but trouble, so I don't think anyone should use it." Her eyes narrowed at him. "Especially you."

Discord groaned. "But this world is no *fun* if I can't manipulate it the way I want."

"I've seen you manage to do that just fine *without* the amulet."

"Yes, yes, but turning inanimate objects into other inanimate objects is so old cap. If I had my amulet, I could give them sentience, manipulate the minds and emotions of mortals, control the weather without Zeus interfering, create absurd plants and animals to annoy the Hades out of Demeter and Artemis! I could pretty much do *anything* !"

Fluttershy lowered her head in sadness. "So…having that amulet

and control over the entire world would make you happy?"

"Well, duh!" He stuck out his tongue. "You think ruling the world would be a *bad* thing?"

"It just," she said in a small voice, "sounds kind of lonely."

He stiffened. "What?"

"All those ponies, afraid of you, afraid of what you might do to them." She shook her head. "They certainly wouldn't like you."

As she locked eyes with him again, Discord's body became completely still. They were so wide, so innocent, so truly mesmerizing.

"I've asked you this so many times when you were in stone," she said quietly, "but…I must know…was there *no one* who liked you? What about your parents?"

Sighing sadly, he said, "I was born from pure Chaos. Not exactly the most involved parent, stirring underground all the time."

Crossing her legs in nervousness, she asked, "Didn't you ever have…a friend?"

He looked away. "I've…never had a need for friends."

"Oh," she said, hanging her head.

Glancing back at her, he said, "But…I suppose I… *did* feel lonely sometimes. But that was before…"

She lifted her head. "Before what?"

Facing her again, he whispered, "You came along."

The blush returned to Fluttershy's cheeks and she hid behind her mane once again.

"Why do you shy away from me," Discord asked, "when all I do is give you praise?"

She pulled her mane further over her face so that he could not see her small smile. "I, uh…don't think I'm worthy of such praise."

"Nonsense," he said with a shake of his head. "Let me tell you, sweet Fluttershy. I've lived for millennia. I've seen all the beauties. Aphrodite, Persephone, Helen of Troy. I've seen them all. But none of them," he leaned forward, " *none* of them, hold a candle to you, my dear. With your sweet demeanor, kind heart and delicate appearance, you have the complexion of an *angle* !"

She raised an eyebrow, making Discord wince.

"Sorry. What is it you ponies today call it? Oh, yes." He grinned with half-lidded eyes. " *Angel* ."

She turned away, her face beat red and the corners of her mouth reaching all the way to her ears. No one had ever offered her such a compliment, and, like her dreams, it made her heart beat at a tempo that defied logic. And, since he was bound by Demeter's Lasso of Truth, he must have been sincere.

That glimmer of hope that he was not entirely evil returned inside her. *Maybe all he really needs is a friend to show him a little kindness.*

And she was very happy to be that friend.

Discord was frowning, as he had taken her turning away as a sign of rejection.

"I'm…sorry if what I said frightened you…"

"No, no!" Fluttershy said, facing him with a smile. "I…I'm flattered."

His ears flapped excitedly. "Do you think you can come closer? I'd like to see you better."

After a moment of hesitance, Fluttershy took a step forward.

"Closer," he murmured.

She stepped up so that she was just an inch away from the force-

field. "Is this alright?"

His eyes wandered, taking in every detail of her face. He let out a toothy grin of satisfaction.

"Perfect."

Meanwhile, in the main lounge, Zapp was pressing buttons on the control panel.

"How do you turn the volume up? I can't hear what they're saying!"

She jumped as a siren went off.

"Quit playing with that!" Humdrum hollered, pressing a few keys to switch the siren off.

"Fluttershy?" Mare-velous said, pressing into her ear. "Fluttershy, are ya there?"

"She must've taken her commlink out," the Matter-Horn said.

"Why in the hay would she do that?" Zapp asked.

Mare-velous rolled her eyes. "Maybe if you girls hadn't been arguing over haircare products!"

Radiance gasped. "I'll have you know that haircare products are *worth* arguing over…"

"Why is she so close to the force-field?" Zapp said, leaning closer to the monitor. "What does she think she's doing?!"

"She's fine," the Matter-Horn said. "That force-field is impenetrable to organic as well as magical matter."

Radiance squinted at the screen. "There's something strange about that Discord."

Crossing her hooves, Mare-velous said, "You're figurin' that out just now?"

"Haven't you noticed that his eyes have hardly ever left Fluttershy? And when he looks at her, his pupils dilate? In fact, I don't believe he's even blinked more than twice since she entered the room."

"Do gods even need to blink?" Fili-Second asked.

"Not to mention he seems *very* elated to see Fluttershy."

Fili-Second tilted her head as she looked at the screen. "Fluttershy seems kind of happy too."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was almost as if…" Radiance shook her head. "No, no. It's absolutely ridiculous."

There was a ringing sound and the heroes turned to the couch where a cell phone was vibrating.

"One sec," Zapp said, going over to the phone. She picked it up. "Hey, Daring, what's up?"

" *Dash,* " Daring Do said from the other end, her voice sounding panicked. " *I've just gone over my old Gracian texts talking about the Discordian Prophecy, and I think one of the words may have been mistranslated and if it means what I think it means, your friend Fluttershy may be in danger!* "

Glancing at her colleagues, Zapp took a few steps away. "What do you mean? What does it say?"

" *Well,* " she said over a rustling of paper, " *when going over the prophecy, I remembered that in Ancient Gracian, the word for 'core' also translates into 'heart,' so rather than Discord being released by the 'Keeper of His* Core *,' it could mean the 'Keeper of His* Heart!' *And, well, this changes the meaning of the text* completely! *"*

"What are you say—?"

" *I'm saying that if your friend Fluttershy's the one who released Discord, it's because she has his* heart! *And the next couple lines say he will give the Keeper of His Heart everlasting life, making her his and his alone!* "

Zapp glanced back at the screen, showing the footage of Discord and Fluttershy, laughing together.

"You don't mean…"

" *Dash, I think Discord plans to make your friend his immortal bride!* "

Zapp dropped the phone, causing her colleagues to turn.

"You alright?" the Matter-Horn asked.

"Get Fluttershy away from that creep!" Zapp shouted, quickly picking up the phone.

" *WHAT?!* " Daring Do hollered at a volume that could be heard by everyone in the room. " *YOU ACTUALLY LET HER NEAR THAT MONSTER?!* "

"It's okay!" Zapp said, bringing the phone to her face. "Even if Discord manages to break through the force-field, Demeter's Lasso is holding him back."

" *Demeter's Lasso?!"* There was a slap, possibly Daring's hoof against her face. "That's *what you used to secure him?!* "

Zapp frowned. "Yeah, what's the problem? Nothing can escape…"

" *Dash,* " Daring said slowly. " *It took* all twelve *of the Olympian Gods' combined powers to put him in that statue. Do you* really *think Demeter's Lasso alone is enough to hold him?* "

"What are you talking about? We've had him tied up all…"

As she caught another glimpse of the screen, she saw how intensely Discord was looking at Fluttershy and how close to her he was leaning. Zapp's eyes widened in realization as she dropped her phone a second time.

"He's playing us!" she shouted. She pressed her hoof into her ear. "Fluttershy, get outta…" She groaned. "Right, she took out her earpiece!"

"What's going on?" the Matter-Horn asked.

"No time! Fili, get down there!"

"On it!" Fili-Second said as she zoomed off.

"Come on!" Zapp said as she flew towards the stairs. "We can't let him take her!"

While Zapp was having her realization, Fluttershy and Discord were laughing over a story he had told.

"You actually turned Demeter into a," Fluttershy said, biting hard on her lip, " *tree* ?!"

"She said she always felt one with nature!" Discord exclaimed. "And she made a *fine* tree at that! But let me tell you, the fruit she bore was just *sour* ! I mean have you *met* Persephone?"

Despite herself, she laughed harder. "That's so *mean* !"

"Then why are you still laughing?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea!"

He grinned as he watched her face, which seemed to glow even brighter with every chortle.

"Oh Fluttershy," Discord said with a sigh. "I've waited so long for this moment."

She smiled up at him. "Me too."

"Really? I mean you're not the one bound to tell the truth here."

"Really. I," she said with a blush, "I've…wondered about you for a long time."

"And," he said, moving his face as close to the force-field as possible, "you are not afraid of me?"

"Maybe I was a little…nervous about meeting you at first, but afraid?" She shook her head. "Never."

He craned his neck downward so that his eyes were at her level. "You have no idea how pleased I am to hear that."

She blushed deeper as she twirled a strand of her mane around her hoof. "I'd, um…actually like to be a tree."

"Hmm," Discord said in thought. "I suppose that can be arranged."

"Or a flower. Something related to nature."

He grinned. "I think you'd make a *lovely* flower. You've talked so much about flowers, I've always wondered which one is your favorite."

"Oh," she said, shaking her head. "I could never pick just *one* . I love all of them! Roses, tulips, mums, lady slippers…"

Suddenly, a bouquet appeared in her hooves. It consisted of roses, tulips, mums and…pink ballet shoes hanging from stems. When Fluttershy did a double take, she realized they were made of paper.

"Sorry they're not real flowers," Discord said. "Part of my restrictions in the mortal realm."

Looking up at him, Fluttershy backed away in alarm. "I-I…thought you couldn't use your magic while in that rope."

Frowning, Discord glanced at the paper flowers and then at the rope. Chuckling, he shook his head.

"Looks like the dog's out of the sack."

Fili-Second zipped in between Fluttershy and the force-field. "Fluttershy! Discord's playing us!"

The god smirked. "A little late for that, Hermes Gal."

Just then, the upper half of Discord's body detached itself, causing Fluttershy to drop her bouquet. His lower half slipped out of the rope

before it could close in on him. Having nothing to hold, the rope tightened itself into a knot. As his body came back together, Discord pierced his paw and claw through the force-field and pushed it aside, making a circular hole. He hoisted himself through the hole and snatched up Fluttershy.

This series of actions was so surprising and so quick that not even Fili-Second had time to react.

"How…when…what?" Fluttershy said, shocked to find herself in Discord's arms.

"At last," Discord murmured, his claw running along her chin as he brought her face to his. "How I've longed to hold you…"

The slow movement of his claw made Fluttershy shiver, but it also made her face feel hot. His red and yellow eyes were burning into hers, and she could not find the willpower to look away.

"Get away from her, you creep!" Zapp hollered as the rest of the Power Ponies came racing down the hall.

Rolling his eyes, Discord put up a force-field of his own. The heroes collided into the golden shield.

"See how *you* like it!" he exclaimed.

"W-What are you doing?" Fluttershy asked.

She flinched as Discord ran his claw through her mane.

"Oh, don't worry, my darling," he said, gently pressing his forehead to hers. "For your sake, I won't harm them." He sent the heroes a glare. "This time."

The Power Ponies opened their mouths to shout as they banged against the force-field, but their voices were not heard by Fluttershy or Discord.

"But I can't have them interfering with my plans," he said.

"W-W-What plans?" Fluttershy asked, shrinking in fear.

He smirked as he swept a lock of hair out of her face. "The plans I have for you, my dear."

She squeaked. "Me?!"

"A thank you gift for setting me free. Trust me. You'll *love* it." Narrowing his eyes at the unheard but persistent heroes, he said, "But first, why don't we go somewhere more," he sent Fluttershy a sultry look, " *private* ?"

Whipping out his claw, he sliced at the air, tearing a hole in space. Fluttershy's eyes widened at the swirling red vortex before her.

"W-What's that?" Fluttershy asked.

"Relax, my dear, it's perfectly safe," Discord said. "Although, you might feel a slight tickle in your throat upon going through. I'd suggest holding your breath."

Fluttershy took in a gulp of air as he clutched her to his chest and leaped through the vortex. As the vortex closed up, Discord's force-field fell away. Once the heroes had picked themselves off the floor, they gazed in horror at the place where they had last seen their friend.

"Fluttershy," Zapp said in a cracked voice.

I decided to have Fluttershy not present for Discord's release for two reasons: 1) To show that no matter what measures the others took to prevent the prophecy from happening, it still happened. 2) So we could have this Silence-of-the-Lambs-style first meeting.

Yes, Clarice and Hannibal's first meeting was a HUGE inspiration for this chapter. It's actually something I've been wanting to try with Fluttershy and Discord for a long time, and I figured it would be something different from all the other Fluttercord scenarios I've tried (darn it, but that ending is VERY reminiscent of "Bride of Discord!" oh well).

I WAS going to have all the other heroes interrogate Discord one by one, but not only did I think that might drag the story a bit, but why would the heroes beat around the bush if they knew he was interested in Fluttershy and probably only talk to her? Especially after keeping her away from the statue didn't work, I saw no reason why they would repeat that mistake (although it also turned out to be the wrong decision).

Heart of Stone: Part 3

Sweet! Two chapters in two days! I'm on a roll here!

" *I'm not upset that you lied to me, I'm upset that from now on I can't believe you."*

- Friedrich Nietzsche

The Power Ponies were still by the holding cells, stunned. Mare-velous was on the floor of Discord's cell, holding her rope in her hooves.

"He just…took her," Zapp said, staring at the place where Fluttershy had been taken through the vortex.

"I can't believe he'd been playing us all that time," the Matter-Horn said, her hoof caressing the control panel for the security system. "How could I have known that basic protection spells would be useless against his chaos magic?"

"He just slid right through," Mare-velous said, clutching her rope to her chest. "Nothin' can escape Ole Bessie. Nothin' except…" She stiffened in realization. "Fluttershy." She face-hoofed herself. "Stupid! I should've known! If Fluttershy'd been able to escape Ole Bessie, *of course* the source of her power would be able to do the same!"

"Whatever does that monster want with poor, darling Fluttershy?" Radiance asked.

"He wants to marry her," Zapp murmured.

"WHAT?!" the Power Ponies exclaimed, turning in the pegasus' direction.

"Daring called and said that according to the Discordian Prophecy, the one who sets Discord free will be given everlasting life and belong to Discord. We *thought* this pony was called the Keeper of His Core, but, because ancient Gracian is *so* unspecific, turns out it's the Keeper of His *Heart* ."

"Which means…" Mare-velous said.

"That scoundrel is actually *smitten* with Fluttershy!" Radiance said. "I *knew* it! The way he spoke to her, it was blatantly obvious!"

"I'd have to say," Fili-Second said, "as crazy as the idea of an evil chaos god being in love with sweet little Fluttershy, it's kind of expected what with her visiting his statue all those years and him listening to her. You think he'll let us be bridesmaids? Or at least invite us to the wedding?"

"There ain't gonna be a weddin'," Mare-velous said, gripping her rope as she stood. "Not if we have anythin' to say about it!"

"But what can *we* do?" Radiance asked. "We don't even know where they are!"

The elevator opened up and Humdrum came out, panting. "I saw what happened on the monitor! Bad news, I can't trace the signal of Fluttershy's commlink!"

"Then wherever could she be?" Radiance asked.

"I don't think," Mare-velous said, her face becoming grim again, "she's in this world anymore."

Fili-Second gasped. "She's *dead* ?!"

"What? No, no! I mean Discord may have taken her to another realm, maybe his own. Demeter told me each god has their own private realm or special place where they have free reign."

"I remember reading about a Realm of Chaos in my Gracian Mythology books," Zapp said. "But it's impossible to get to! Only Discord can get in and out without a hitch! Even if we *did* manage to get there, no pony's ever come out the same! We could come back

with fish heads, or ostrich wings, or just completely lose our marbles!"

Fili-Second gasped. "That bully! He ain't getting *my* marbles!"

"We gotta at least *try* to get there," Mare-velous said. "I'm just not sure how."

"What about if we summoned him like you summoned Demeter?" Zapp asked.

"I don't know. To summon a god, ya need to make an offerin'. Fortunately, Demeter's only interested in plants and produce. But to summon a god whose thing is *chaos* ," Mare-velous said, twisting her rope around her hoof, "I shudder to think what sort of offerin' *that* would take."

The Masked Matter-Horn lifted her head slowly. "It's risky, but I have an idea. But first," she said, turning to her colleagues, "we need to secure the Amulet of Chaos. Now that Discord has Fluttershy, he's sure to go after his amulet next."

"But what about Fluttershy?" Zapp asked. "Who knows what that monster is doing to her?!"

"I…actually wouldn't worry about her *too* much, Dash," Mare-velous said.

"What?!" She flew into her face. "How can you say that?! You're about as close to her as I am! How can you *not* worry?!"

She cocked an eyebrow. "Remember what happened *last* time some creep tried takin' advantage of Fluttershy?"

Zapp paused and then cracked a smile. "Oh, yeah. That old Caballeron never saw it coming!"

"Fluttershy can hold her own for a little while," the Matter-Horn said, "but if Discord gets ahold of the Amulet of Chaos, our chances of defeating Discord and saving Fluttershy will be even slimmer."

"But how can we stop Discord from taking the amulet too?"

Radiance asked. "Your security spells didn't work."

"Well then," the Matter-Horn said, narrowing her eyes in determination, "we'll just have to use something stronger than security spells."

Gasping, Humdrum put his claws to his mouth. "You don't mean…?"

The Matter-Horn nodded. "Spike, call Bon-Bon and tell her to meet us a few blocks down from here. Radiance, you better get back to work before Suri notices you're gone."

"Coco can only cover me for so long," Radiance said.

"Fili-Second, you stay here and watch the monitors for any more danger, see if Discord stirs up any more trouble."

"Roger Wilco!" Fili-Second said, saluting.

"Roger who?" Humdrum said.

"What about us?" Zapp asked, indicating herself and Mare-velous.

"I'll need you to come to the museum with me," the Matter-Horn said. "As for you, Mare-velous," she looked at the orange mare sincerely, "I need you to help me with something…special."

Fluttershy let out a squeal as she was suddenly dropped. When she landed, her body started bobbing up and down. Looking down, she realized she was lying on a strip of pink rubber. In fact, it was an entire road of rubber stretching across…

She had no idea what she was looking at.

The sky was purple, swirling like an endless abyss. When Fluttershy peered over the rubber road, the same abyss was beneath her. Shrieking, she backed away from the edge so that she wouldn't accidentally fall. Above her, a giant bird she did not recognize was soaring. It was turquoise, with yellow feathers and a sharp beak, and was the size of a cow. She ducked as the bird swooped downward.

There were chunks of land floating all around, containing plants of odd shapes and colors. Some of these islands floated upside-down and sideways. For a moment, she was mesmerized by the unique species of plants, until one of the flytraps caught the monstrous bird in its pod.

After another shriek, Fluttershy started breathing heavily and realized that the air smelled like moldy cheese. Discord seemed to enjoy this smell, for he was inhaling it deeply.

"Ah," he said, releasing his breath. "It's just how I left it!"

Fluttershy gasped as a swarm of what appeared to be eyeballs equipped with batwings surrounded Discord.

"That's right, my little abominations," Discord said, his voice suddenly becoming cutesy. "Daddy's home, and he's never leaving you again."

He kissed one of the eyebats, making Fluttershy cringe in discomfort.

"It's good to know that no matter what those goody-goody gods do to me," Discord said, snuggling the eyebats, "they can't touch this place."

While he was distracted, Fluttershy took the opportunity to slowly crawl away. She had thought she could trust Discord, but knowing that he had been playing her by pretending to be captured, and then captured *her* , she knew she had to get out of here before…she shivered to think what he was going to do to her. She had no idea where the exit was, but she had to at least try.

But she was so busy checking to see that he wasn't following her that she didn't realize she was reaching the end of the rubber road. She shrieked as her front hoof gave out beneath her. She would've fallen into the dark abyss if Discord hadn't caught her with his tail.

"Whoopsie!" he said, bringing her to his face. "Forgive me, darling, but in all the excitement of my homecoming, I nearly forgot about you. How neglectful of me. I promise it won't be this way after the

ceremony."

"C-Ceremony?" Fluttershy asked in confusion.

"I wouldn't wander around here if I were you. Sometimes even *I* don't know what little beasties might turn up." He chuckled. "Adds to the thrill of things, don't you think?"

She glanced around. "W-W-Where…?"

"Oh, but where are my manners?" he said as he gently set her down. "You've been in my home for two minutes and I haven't even offered to take your coat!" He leaned forward to whisper, "This may surprise you, but I don't get many visitors."

With a swift *whoosh* , Fluttershy's lab coat was suddenly blown off her body. Blushing in embarrassment, she tried to cover herself with her hooves as much as possible.

"Oh, please," Discord said, rolling his eyes. "You ponies go naked half the time anyway." He looked her over. "But, if you prefer some covering…"

He snapped his fingers and Fluttershy found herself dressed in a green Ancient Gracian-style dress. Chiton, she believed, as it was held together with buttons over her shoulders. Her head suddenly felt heavier, so she put her hooves up to her mane to find it tied up in a braid wrapped around her head.

"What the…?" Fluttershy started to say.

"And, of course," Discord said, "what sort of gracious host would I be if I didn't offer the lovely lady a present?"

She scowled. "Now see here, Discord, I…"

She was cut off as Discord dropped to one knee and held out a bouquet of flowers to her. It was the same bouquet he had given her earlier, with the mums, the tulips, the roses, and the ballet slippers.

"I figured since you dropped the last one…" Discord said.

Still stunned by the gesture, Fluttershy slowly took the bouquet in her hooves, making the god clasp his paw and claw together excitedly. This bouquet was slightly different from the first, as the stems, leaves and petals felt and smelled real.

"I…thought you couldn't make real plants without the amulet," Fluttershy said.

"Only in the mortal realm," Discord said, gesturing to his surroundings. "Here in my Realm of Chaos, the rules of the mortal realm don't apply. I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, with no restrictions."

Fluttershy stiffened at that thought. "N-N- *No* restrictions?"

"Well," he said with a shrug, "except maybe the fact that no one can get in and out of this place without my saying so. That's pretty much the only rule we have here."

She looked around nervously. "You mean I…c-c-can't leave?"

"Oh, *you* can leave whenever you'd like."

She gazed up at him hopefully. "Really?"

"When I let you, of course."

Fluttershy frowned.

"But for now, relax! Pull up a seat!"

In a flash, Fluttershy was sitting on some sort of red couch adorned with soft cushions. Discord lay sprawled on another couch across from her. A small round table appeared between them. Snapping his fingers, Discord conjured up two golden goblets hovering in midair. An amphora flashed above the goblets and started pouring red liquid into them both. Grabbing one goblet, Discord held it out to Fluttershy.

"Have a drink," he said.

She stared at the goblet unsurely. While she wasn't as much an

expert in Gracian Mythology as Rainbow Dash or even Applejack, she did know a few of the stories. She had read the myth of Hades and Persephone and how the God of the Underworld had tricked the Goddess of Spring into eating food from the Underworld so that she would be doomed to stay with him forever as his wife. She wasn't sure if the same rules applied to the Realm of Chaos, but she couldn't take any chances.

"I, um, actually," Fluttershy said, attempting to smile politely, "don't drink wine."

"Really?" Discord said, looking curiously at the goblet. "Huh. Well, I must say you're the first pony I've met to say that." He snapped his fingers, turning the wine into brown liquid. "How do you feel about chocolate milk?"

She scrunched her muzzle in confusion. "You know what chocolate milk is?"

"Of course! I *invented* it!" He rolled his eyes with a groan. "Didn't really catch on with the other gods though. Dionysus said, 'If it doesn't make your brain fuzzy, it's not worth drinking!'" He huffed. "If he had *tried* it, he would've seen what a sugar rush can *really* do!"

Fluttershy held up her hoof. "I'm…not really thirsty."

"Hungry, then?"

He snapped his fingers to conjure up an assortment of food on the table.

"Take your pick. I have all sorts of cheeses, breads, apples, olives…"

Fluttershy tried to ignore the grumble in her stomach. The food did look scrumptious. Then Discord suddenly appeared on the couch with her, making her gasp. His body was coiled around her and his face was right beside hers.

"Grapes?" he asked, holding up a stem of purple grapes. Smirking, he plucked one grape off. "I'd be happy to…pop them in your mouth."

As he moved the grape towards her mouth, she slowly recoiled. "N-N-No, thank you."

"Oh," he said, tossing the grapes over his shoulder. "Very well." He popped over to the other side of her. "Pomegranate?"

Her eyes widened at the round red fruit in his claw. Squealing, she backed away to the far side of the couch.

"What's the matter?" Discord said, raising an eyebrow. "Don't like pomegranates either?"

"N-N-No, it's not that, it's just…" She paused, wondering if she should tell him. "I-I've…read the myth of Hades and Persephone."

He stared at her and then down at the pomegranate. Then he slapped himself over the forehead and laughed.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, tossing the pomegranate aside. "Oh, oh, *oh* ! You thought…" Clutching his belly, he fell back onto the couch. "Oh no *wonder* you were acting so strange! You have no idea what's going on, do you?" Sitting up, he wiped away a tear. "You needn't worry, sweet one. The rules of the Underworld don't apply here. You can eat and drink anything you'd like with no strings attached."

She looked at him suspiciously. "How do I know you're not just saying that?"

"Hmm," Discord said, tapping his chin. "I suppose that *would* be difficult to determine, considering I'm not wearing Demeter's little lie detector anymore."

Fluttershy folded her hooves across her chest. "But you *were* lying."

"What? No." He waved his paw. "That wasn't lying. I never said that rope would actually be able to contain me."

"I see." She turned her back to him. "Then I suppose since that rope never had any power over you, none of what you were saying was true either."

She felt him take her hoof as she was spun around to face him. His

cocky expression had been replaced with a sincere one, which struck Fluttershy by surprise. And was that…sadness she saw in his eyes?

"That rope may not have been able to hold me," Discord said, closing his paw and claw around her hoof, "but it still compelled me to tell the truth."

She stared at the hoof he held in bewilderment. "So…"

He nodded. "Every word I said to you back there was the complete and honest truth."

Closing her eyes, she wrenched her hoof out of his grasp. "How can I know you're telling the truth right now?"

She felt his talon on her chin. When she opened her eyes, his were staring back at her, wide and focused.

"You can't," he said softly. "You're just going to have to trust me."

With a scowl, she swatted his claw away. "And what exactly have you done to earn my trust? First you pretend to be captured, make me believe that you were harmless, then you escape and then you kidnap me and whisk me all the way here!" Glancing around, she asked, "Why did you even bring me here? What are you planning?"

Sighing, Discord shook his head. "Of course, of course. You of all ponies deserve an explanation."

With a snap of his fingers, a lyre appeared over the table and started strumming on its own. The tune was slow and soothing.

"I apologize for deceiving you," Discord said. "I had no intention of doing so, at least to you. But the deception was necessary. You see," he scooted closer, "it was my only way of meeting you."

Fluttershy blinked. "What do you mean?"

"See, those heroes had mentioned your name. I figured if I pretended to be their prisoner, eventually they would reveal you to me. After all, I had never seen your face, and it was much easier

than collecting every yellow, pink-haired, teal-eyed pegasus mare in town. Not to mention less messy."

Shifting uncomfortably, she said, "Okay. But…if you could've broken out of that cell at any time, why did you still keep up the charade when I came to you?"

He looked at her as if her question was absurd. "I was enjoying your company, of course. I didn't want our conversation to end so abruptly when it was going so well."

"But…it *did* end abruptly."

"Yes, well," Discord said, clearing his throat, "I may have gotten a bit carried away…"

"A *bit* ?!" Fluttershy shouted, indicating her dress.

"I didn't mean for it to go like this. I *was* going to eventually lead up to the question of you visiting my realm and *then* bring you here." He levitated the bouquet of flowers into view. "If I wasn't so intent on impressing you, this whole thing would've gone a lot smoother."

" *Impressing* me?!" Fluttershy clenched her hooves as she tried to hold back her anger. "What is it you *want* from me?!"

He stared at her. "You mean you haven't guessed?"

Her eyes narrowed at him.

"Alright, alright. Confession time."

He snapped his fingers, making the table of food vanish and transforming the couch opposite them into a throne. The wood was black, its cushions red, and from the top came a set of menacing deer antlers.

"You see, Fluttershy," Discord said, floating over to the throne, "as a god," he lowered himself down into a lounging position, his tail hanging over the armrest, "you'd think I wouldn't want for anything. After all, I can conjure anything I'd like with a snap of my fingers."

To demonstrate, he summoned a goblet of chocolate milk. When he raised it to his lips, the goblet slowly disappeared, leaving only the half-circular shape of chocolate milk.

"But no matter what I do," he said, throwing the milk over his shoulder and setting off an explosion, "it's never enough."

He summoned a necklace with a round red jewel embedded in the pendant. Fluttershy's eyes widened as she recognized it as the amulet that had cursed her.

"That's why I used the Amulet of Chaos to take over the mortal realm," Discord said, snapping the replica away. "And let me tell you, it made my charmed existence even charm-ier. Manipulating *this* realm is one thing, but it's so much more fun when there are others around to…experience it."

He frowned upon seeing her disgusted expression. "Rope or not, I won't hide the fact that I'm imperfect to you. Everyone knows what I've done. What's the point in denying it?"

When her expression did not change, he sighed sadly. "Point is that I was having the time of my life until I was turned to stone and placed in that cave. Alone." He paused. "I…I couldn't move, couldn't see, I didn't have my magic. I was left with…nothing. Just darkness, and silence. No sound but the drops of water, the occasional breeze or the scatter of tiny insects."

These details made the anger inside Fluttershy melt away. She had thought about what it must have been like for him in that statue, and knowing that her suspicions had been correct didn't make her feel any better.

He grinned at her. "Then you came along."

Rising from his throne, he slowly approached her. "By speaking to me, by treating me like a living being rather than a statue, you brought light into my darkness, and warmth to the coldness of my stone prison."

He gently took her hooves, making Fluttershy blush at the sudden

heat rushing through her. She was breathing heavily as he lifted her from the couch and floated backward, leading her towards the throne.

"It's because of you I was brought to the museum," he said, his gaze fixated on her, "and I had many more interesting things to listen to." He brought his paw to her face, and this time, Fluttershy did not flinch away. "But the sound I looked forward to hearing the most… was your sweet voice."

She looked shyly down at her hooves. "I…had no idea my…talking to you meant that much."

"Oh, but it did, Fluttershy." He frowned slightly. "My only regrets during all those visits were that I couldn't talk back, couldn't see you, couldn't…" His paw moved down to her shoulder. "…couldn't hold you, couldn't…"

Fluttershy gasped as his paw reached down her back.

"…couldn't comfort you when you were sad." His claw moved up her foreleg. "You might as well have been talking to a statue."

Fluttershy's mouth opened as she struggled to find the words to tell him that his touches were making her uncomfortable. But she couldn't. For while his paw and claw felt uncomfortable, they were also soft and smooth, and the way they gently rubbed her made her feel…almost safe.

He then effortlessly lifted her up as if she were weightless and set her down on the throne. Holding her hoof like a delicate object, he knelt down on one knee.

"But here you are now, with me," Discord said, his eyes becoming glossy. Fluttershy was surprised, for she had no idea gods could cry. "My admiration for you has grown over the years, Fluttershy, as I've heard your voice mature and become all the more sweeter. You looked upon my face without fear, and when I visited you in your dreams, you welcomed me. Then, by accepting all I have to offer, you released me at last."

Fluttershy's heart skipped a beat as he ran his claw through her mane.

"I owe everything to you, Fluttershy," he said, his voice lowering into a whisper. "There's no pony like you in all the cosmos, no pony as kind, or as caring, or as…" He caressed her soft cheek. "…as beautiful."

His claw lingered on her cheek for a few seconds before returning to her hoof. "I've had plenty of time to think of how I would thank you, how I would reward you for all you've done for me. It wasn't until a few years back, when I noticed how you'd blossomed from a shy young filly into an independent young mare that I realized what I had to do."

Fluttershy heart was beating wildly in anticipation. "W-What is it?"

Smirking, he snapped his fingers and a velvet pink rectangular jewelry case appeared in his paw. He opened it and held it up to her. Inside was a necklace with pink diamonds embedded in the chain, a pink butterfly-shaped jewel at its center.

Fluttershy put her hoof to her mouth. The necklace was beautiful and the pendant matched her cutie mark exactly.

Her previous opinions of him were starting to return. Perhaps he wasn't as evil as he appeared. True, it would have been nice if he had asked her if she wanted to come to his place instead of simply taking her, but maybe he just wasn't used to these sorts of things. The gift truly was thoughtful, not because it was beautiful but because it represented her personality. And he sounded truly grateful for her visits, which he seemed to care about more than her setting him free.

She was about to thank him when he spoke.

"Fluttershy Buttercream, will you marry me?"

Her smile vanished and she looked up at the god, her eyes filled with shock. "What?"

"Marry me, Fluttershy." Still holding the case in his claw, he took her

hoof in his paw. "Marry me and become my immortal Queen of Chaos."

"First, my Anubis statuette gets stolen and shattered," Mr. Fetlock said, rubbing the bridge of his muzzle, "then my Discord statue comes to life…"

He turned to the three ponies and dragon. Twilight wore her usual purple pantsuit, Rainbow was dressed for work again, Spike hid behind Twilight's leg, while Mistress Mare-velous remained in costume.

"And now," he growled, "you're telling me that you want to remove *another* priceless, historical artifact from my museum entirely!"

"Boss, calm down," Rainbow Dash said.

"No!" He stomped is hoof. "I will *not* calm down!" He darted his eyes at Mistress Mare-velous. "Why is it every time you Power Ponies are around, something from my exhibit gets lost and or broken?!"

"Mr. Fetlock, if you will please listen…" Twilight said.

"It wasn't enough that that careless, obnoxious colleague of yours took my bolt," Mr. Fetlock said, advancing on Mare-velous, "you have to take my prized amulet too?!"

"Obnoxious?!" Rainbow exclaimed, putting her hooves on her hips.

"You Power Ponies call yourselves heroes," he said, poking Mare-velous in the chest, "but you're nothing but thieves and vandals!"

"I don't think you understand the severity of this situation, Mr. Fetlock," Mare-velous said, taking a step forward. "Now that Discord's out, he's gonna come lookin' for his amulet. If we don't get it outta here first, he's gonna take it. Besides," she said with a smirk, "ya wouldn't want him comin' back here and ruinin' all yerr other exhibits, now would ya?"

Mr. Fetlock took a step back, shivering at the memory of his Eros

statue being transformed into gelatin.

"On second thought," he said with a nervous grin, "we need to make room for the Anugypt exhibit anyway."

Half an hour later, Twilight, Mare-velous and Spike were in Twilight's limo, a thick metal box containing the Amulet of Chaos in the unicorn's lap. Rainbow had stayed behind to finish her shift at the museum. The driver turned back to them. She was a light yellow earth mare with blue eyes and a curly pink and blue mane.

"Where to now, Miss Sparkle?"

"Home, Bon-Bon," Twilight said. "And…I'd appreciate it if you'd give us some privacy."

Nodding, Bon-Bon pressed a button to raise the divider between the driver's seat and the backseat. Once the vehicle started moving, Mare-velous turned to Twilight.

"So what's with all the crypticness?" she asked. "What's this plan ya've got for stopping Discord from gettin' the amulet?"

"Wait until we're alone," Twilight said, eyeing the driver. "As much as I trust Bon-Bon, this is something more secret than our own identities." She turned to Mare-velous. "So secret, there's a reason I didn't ask the others to come along."

Mare-velous blinked in surprise. "So why just me?"

"I figured you were the most likely to keep this a secret from the rest of the team." Twilight looked at her sternly. "Since you were already so intent on keeping what you knew about Fluttershy a secret from the rest of us."

The earth mare rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "Oh, right. That." She raised an eyebrow. "But I thought you said we *shouldn't* be keepin' anymore secrets from the rest of the team."

Twilight sighed. "Once you see what I have to show you, you'll

understand."

When they reached Twilight's penthouse apartment, she led Mare-velous and Spike to her study. As Mare-velous had expected, the shelves were stocked full of books and organized very neatly. Not a speck of dust was in sight.

Twilight then came to a portrait hanging on the wall. It was of herself as a young filly, cuddling a baby version of Spike. Illuminating her horn, Twilight removed the portrait from the wall. Using another spell, she made a control panel appear in the spot the portrait had hung.

Mare-velous watched as Twilight let the panel scan her hoof, her eyes, and her horn. Then a small cup came out of the panel, into which she spat. It was not unlike the security system for the tower.

" *Name* ?" the machine asked.

"Twilight Sparkle."

There was a *ding* , but nothing happened. Twilight turned to a bookcase on her left and used her magic to pull one book from the shelf. The spine bore the title: *Don't Cry After Sunset* .

The floor shook as the bookcase moved to reveal a secret passage.

"Spike, you stay here," Twilight said.

The dragon nodded with a gulp. "Okay."

She tilted her head towards Mare-velous, indicating for her to follow. As the two mares stepped inside, the bookcase closed behind them.

"Welcome to my private study," Twilight said.

This study was even bigger than the last one, with even more shelves and books. It also held several peculiar objects, like a glowing crystal ball, an assortment of gems, an empty cauldron, and…Mare-velous jumped upon seeing a dragon's claw in a jar.

"I can see why ya didn't bring Spike in here."

She couldn't help but notice that unlike the previous study, this one was messier and disorganized. Books lay open and neglected on the floor and cobwebs decorated the shelves.

"There are many reasons why I never let Spike in here," Twilight said, blowing the dust off an open book. "These books contain dangerous knowledge that I don't want him looking into."

"Whaddya mean?" Mare-velous asked, looking around. "What is all this stuff?"

Twilight looked down ashamedly at the floor. "Books on dark and forbidden magic."

Mare-velous looked at her in shock. "Say what now?"

The unicorn picked up a book and flipped through it. "I've tried to distance myself as far away from dark magic as possible." She shut the book and placed it on a shelf. "But in situations as dire as this, I find they are sometimes necessary. And it's better that the books I find stay locked in here rather than be made available to the world."

Mare-velous shivered as she read some of the titles of the books: *Necromancy, Forbidden Spells: A Reference Guide, 1001 Ways to Vanquish Your Enemy, Raising the Dead for Dummies, Shadow Spells And You* .

"I'd ask how ya managed to get all this stuff," she said, "but I'm afraid of the answer."

"Now you see why I can't have the others seeing this?" Twilight asked. "The knowledge in here can corrupt the weakest of minds."

"Oh." Mare-velous put her hooves on her hips. "So you're worried about corruptin' every pony else on the team, but ya have no problem riskin' that with me?"

"No, Applejack," Twilight said, looking at her sincerely. "I brought you here because unlike the others, you understand the darkness in the world and aren't afraid to face it. You watched your parents get murdered right before your eyes, you've been to the Underworld and back."

Mare-velous' eyes widened. "How'd ya know about that? Did Fluttershy tell ya?"

She responded with a wave of her hoof. "It's not important. What *is* important is that in one of these books, there is a spell that we can use to protect the Amulet of Chaos from Discord. Since it involves using some dark magic, it'll be stronger against any god. And, if my memory serves correctly, there should also be a spell in here that can help us travel between realms, even the Realm of Chaos."

"I still don't get why I had to come here. Couldn't ya have gotten the spells yourself?"

"Yes, but I don't remember which book it's in, not to mention it's been forever since I've organized this place. I'm going to need your help to find the right spells."

Mare-velous glanced back uncomfortably at the morbid titles. "There…anythin' I should know before I open these creepy-lookin' books up?"

"Yup," Twilight said as she picked up another open book. "Don't read any of the spells aloud, and try not to be pulled in by their tempting, dark content."

The earth mare narrowed her eyes. "Thanks."

While Twilight flipped through her book, Mare-velous decided to start with *Forbidden Spells: A Reference Guide* , as that seemed to fit what they were looking for. After blowing the dust off the cover, she opened it up to the title page.

There was something scribbled on the page. It must have been written some time ago, for the penciling was faded. Upon squinting, she saw that it read:

To Twilie,

Hope you find what you're looking for in here.

Love, S.S.

"Who's S.S.?"

A magenta aura encased the title page, turning it over.

"Ignore that," Twilight said quickly. "We have more pressing matters to deal with."

Mare-velous wanted to ask further about this, but remembering Fluttershy, she decided to listen to Twilight.

After flipping through the book, Mare-velous came across something called a Flight Spell. It made her pause because the page showed a picture of an alicorn. Beneath the name of the spell were some words in Pony Latin.

" *Terra, penna…* ?" she attempted to say.

"I said don't read the spells aloud!" Twilight hollered.

Mare-velous showed the page to her. "Is this the spell ya use to make yerr wings come out?"

Twilight stiffened as she stared at the page. Then she nodded slowly. Mare-velous looked at her in concern.

"The spell ya use to turn yourself into the Masked Matter-Horn is… forbidden?"

Twilight said nothing for a long while. Then she pulled out another book from the shelf.

"Like I said, we have more pressing matters to deal with."

Mare-velous sighed, knowing the unicorn was right. Though they were clearly going to continue this conversation later.

I WAS going to finish the arc with this chapter, but thought it would be more dramatic if I cut it off here. MWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

Mxyzptlk's proposal to Kara in the "Supergirl" TV series inspired the proposal in this chapter (one of my favorite episodes).

Heart of Stone: Part 4

" *If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it is yours. If it doesn't, it never was."*

- Unknown

The first sign that the bed Fluttershy awoke in wasn't her own was the fact that it was far more comfortable. Instead of a cheap, lumpy queen-sized mattress, she found herself in a king-sized waterbed. As she sat up, her whole body wiggled along with the mattress. Frantically, she patted her hooves around to get a feel of where she was.

The sheets were red and felt as smooth as satin, and the comforter was, surprisingly, made of black cloud. Looking up, she saw that the canopy was literally a night sky, with stars stretching unto infinity. She couldn't see anything else around her as the bed was shut in with red velvet curtains.

It took a second for Fluttershy to remember the events prior to her blackout. Discord had escaped from stone, pretended to be captured, brought her to his Realm of Chaos against her will, and then…

Squealing, Fluttershy threw the cloud covers off her body. The sight of the chiton dress Discord had dressed her in made her sigh in relief. She was still clothed, and, upon feeling her stomach, there were no other surprises hiding there.

"At least he hadn't…" Fluttershy said with a shudder. "At least he's not *that* kind of god."

Suddenly, said god flashed beside her, lying on his side with one elbow propped up. Shrieking, she pulled the covers over her body, despite not being naked.

"Oh, thank Chaos you're awake!" Discord exclaimed, his tail wagging like a puppy's. "With you being mortal, and I being not, it was difficult to determine the severity of your situation."

"Um…" Fluttershy said, unsure of what question to phrase, as there were so many.

"Are you alright?" he asked, feeling her forehead. "Any dizziness?" He took her hoof, examining it. "Swelling?" A goblet appeared in his claw. "Do you need some water?"

Despite still being in shock, Fluttershy couldn't help but feel a bit touched over his concern, as it seemed genuine.

"I-I'm…fine, thank you," Fluttershy said, politely pushing the goblet away. "Um…what am I doing in your bed?"

He huffed. "Oh, this isn't *my* bed, it's *our* bed!"

Her pupils shrank to a point where they were barely visible. " *Our* bed?!"

"By that I mean it *will* be our bed." He traced his claw along the sheets. "You like? Personally, I prefer to sleep upside-down and have a few spikes and shards present, but I figured you'd be more attracted to gravity." He flopped his whole body up and down, making the bed wriggle. "And bounciness."

When the bed became still again, Fluttershy scooted a few inches away from the god. "Okay, we'll, um, talk about this later. Back to my previous question, why am I in *this* bed?"

"Oh," Discord said, sitting up. "You fainted right after my proposal."

Fluttershy's face turned red. "Oh, right, your…proposal." She rubbed her foreleg awkwardly. "Um…could you…remind me what my answer was?"

"Don't know." He shrugged. "You fainted before you could give one."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah, that…sounds like something I would do."

"Oh, don't worry about it, darling. I understand."

She looked up at him. "You…do?"

"Of course." He smiled brightly. "You were so overjoyed, your delicate mortal body couldn't handle the excitement!"

"What? N-No, I…I mean not that I…"

"But now that you've gotten that out of your system, we can pick up right where we left off!"

In a flash, the bed was gone and Fluttershy found herself back on Discord's throne. Once again, Discord knelt to her with the open box containing the butterfly necklace in his paw.

"So as I was saying, my sweet darling," he said with a toothy grin. "Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Now that the initial shock had worn off into mere uneasiness, Fluttershy was better able to process the situation.

She had to blink several times to keep herself from fainting again.

If any pony had told her this morning that an all-powerful god would be proposing to her, she would have laughed it off. Yet here he was, on one knee, looking at her expectantly with hope in his eyes.

What was she to say? What *could* she say? Despite having visited his statue since she was a filly, they had technically just met today. Did he really expect her to say yes to marriage *now* ?

"I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't faint again," Discord whispered. "But if you must, do you think you could give your answer *before* you pass out? It'd *kill* me to have to wait in anticipation for several more hours."

"N-No, I'm not…" Fluttershy started to say, but then shook her head. "I'm just a bit…confused."

He cocked his head. "What's there to be confused about? The fact that I, the God of Chaos, am offering you the role of a goddess in

return for your eternal love and devotion, or are you wondering how much this necklace cost?" He leaned forward to whisper, "Like we gods need to actually *pay* for anything."

"Um, okay," she said, pulling herself as far back as the seat would allow. "Possibility of theft aside, I just don't understand…why *me* ?"

Discord chuckled. "Why *not* you? Didn't you hear my speech earlier? After hearing your comforting voice for years, is it really any wonder that I should eventually fall in love with you?"

Fluttershy's mouth fell open. "L-L-Love?"

"But of course!" Releasing the jewelry case to let it float in midair, he took her hooves in his paw and claw. "My heart's yearned for you for quite some time, Fluttershy, in a way I never knew it could. See, it's not easy for me to care for some pony. Ever since I realized I was in love with you, I've longed for the day that I would make you my own.

"Although," he said, raising his claw to her face, "I didn't expect you to look so…normal."

Scowling, she swatted his claw away.

"Not that there's anything wrong with how you look!" Discord said hastily. "It's just with all your talk of being a monster, I thought you might be…deformed in some way." He smirked. "Doesn't matter. I'm willing to take you for my wife no matter what you look like, for it's your kind, gentle soul that makes you beautiful."

Fluttershy's nerves were increasing dramatically. "You want *me* to be your *wife* ?"

"It's like I said, buttercup. I have everything a god could possibly want," he said as his ears drooped slightly, "except someone to share it all with. What I need is an eternal companion, someone to appreciate me and everything I create, someone who isn't quick to judge me. After all, Zeus has Hera, Poseidon has Amphitrite, Hephaestus has Aphrodite, Eros has Psyche, Dionysus has Ariadne, even Hades has a bride.

"However," he said, rolling his eyes, "unlike *some* gods I know, I

intend to be loyal to *my* wife and not waste my time with lesser beings. Fortunately, I don't get attracted very easily so you'll have no one to be jealous of."

Fluttershy squeaked as he brought her hooves to his chest, forcing her face to be close to his.

"And out of all the mares," Discord said, his eyelids drooping, "out of all the *females,* out of all the *beings* in the world, I've chosen *you* ," he sighed as he pressed his forehead to hers, "my beautiful Fluttershy, to be the one to bring my days of loneliness to an end."

He gently cupped her chin. "I can make you a *goddess* , Fluttershy. Oh, and you'll be a magnificent one. Mortals everywhere will adore you, worship you." He lifted his head proudly. "Though *I* , of course, will be your most devoted follower. Anything you desire, my queen, will be yours. You will never want for anything, this I swear. So, what do you say, my darling?"

Throughout his entire speech, Fluttershy had been staring unblinkingly at him. She believed him. Truly, she did. His sincerity was apparent in the gentle way he held her hooves and the affection he held in his gaze.

He was in love with her.

Never had anyone admitted such a thing to her, and while she'd dreamed of hearing those words one day, this wasn't what she'd had in mind. She hadn't thought the one who would confess his feelings for her would be a practical stranger…let alone a god.

He looked so excited and hopeful that she truly hated herself for what she was about to do.

"Um," she said, biting her lip, "no?"

Discord seemed to wilt like a flower. Every part of him fell: his face, his ears, his paw and claw, his wings, even his horns.

"N-No?" he said in a voice so small it wrenched Fluttershy's heartstrings.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, trying to sound comforting. "I'm f-flattered, really. I mean no one's ever proposed to me before…"

"Really?" he said, his horns rising slightly. "I would've thought all the males would be knocking at your door."

"N-No, not really." Fluttershy shook her head. "Anyway, everything you said was…nice, but…aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hmm." Discord tapped his chin in thought. "Let's see. Find a fair mortal, wow the mortal with divine gifts and or acts, whisk her away to some remote location, make her your mate." He listed each thought on his talon. Then he shook his head. "Nope. Don't think I left anything out."

She sighed. "Discord, that's not how…"

"Oh, but of course!" he said, smacking his forehead. "How could I have not seen it before?" He looked down at her, his excitement returning. "You'd prefer it if I were in some other form, huh? Perhaps a swan?"

He transformed into a gray swan, keeping his yellow and red eyes and bushy white eyebrow. Fluttershy pressed her back against the throne as she cringed.

"Or maybe a bull?" Discord asked, turning into a gray bull. "Or a giant worm?"

Fluttershy yelped as he turned into a fifty-foot gray worm towering over her.

"Nope?" he said, cocking his bushy eyebrow. "Not doing it for ya?" Sighing, he returned to his original form. "How does Zeus do it?"

Scowling, she shouted, "Your appearance isn't the problem here, Discord!"

"Oh," Discord said, clasping his paw and claw together, "then you find me handsome the way I am?"

Fluttershy had to grip the armrests of the throne to keep her budding

frustration at bay. "That's not what I'm…"

"But of course, if you grow tired of looking at me each day…"

He poofed away. Not wanting to be left alone in this strange dimension, Fluttershy looked around frantically for him.

"I can make myself invisible," Discord's voice whispered into her ear. "And come to you only when you sleep."

"Discord!" she hollered, her face burning as she became angrier.

"You're right," he said, becoming visible again. "Even *I* think that's creepy. I don't know *how* that Psyche managed not to lose her mind over being married to a ghost."

Putting her hoof to her head, Fluttershy said, "Discord, if you'd just listen…"

"It's the place, isn't it?" he said, gesturing around him. "I can change it so it's more to your liking."

Snapping his fingers, he made several patches of exotic flowers appear. The sight was enough to dispel her anger for the moment.

"They're…lovely. But Discord…"

"Or animals! You like animals, right? How 'bout a puppy?"

Suddenly, an Orthros leaped onto her lap. It would've knocked her over had the throne not been so sturdy. At first, she screamed in surprise, but then giggled as the two-headed dog began licking her face.

"Stop, stop!" Her face became serious when she remembered her situation. "Seriously, stop!"

She shoved the Orthros off. Then he began whimpering, which earned her pity, so she allowed him to set his heads on her lap.

"None of that is what's wrong here, Discord," Fluttershy said calmly as she pet the Orthros' heads with both hooves.

"Then what is?!" Discord asked, holding his paw and claw out in desperation. "These things worked for all the other gods!"

She hung her head with a sigh. "That may have been how relationships worked two thousand years ago, but that's not how they work today. I'm glad I finally met you, and I'm glad you're out of that awful stone prison, and I'm more than willing to get to know you better, but…love? Marriage? It's too soon for any of that, Discord!"

"Too soon?" He placed his paw and claw firmly on his hips. "Too soon?! I've been waiting for you for years! Before that, I was frozen in a cave for thousands of years more! If there's one thing that prison has taught me is that life's too short, even for gods! Who knows when someone might try and imprison me again?"

She looked up at him sternly. " *You* may have had a lot of time to think about this, but for me…this is all new. We've only just met and…I hardly know anything about you. Maybe you… *we* felt a connection while you were in that statue, but…our conversations were still one-sided. While I told you so much about my life, you were unable to tell me anything. Can you really expect me to…to *love* you when I wasn't even sure if you were there?"

Discord stared unblinkingly at her, saying nothing for a long while. Fluttershy wondered if he had understood her and was about to ask when he suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Oh, I get it!" he said with realization.

"You do?" Fluttershy asked hopefully.

"What was I *thinking* ?" He slapped himself in the forehead. "Of *course* you wouldn't just say yes to someone you've just met, you're too good for that sort of thing!"

Fluttershy sighed in relief. "Glad we have an understanding."

"You want to be *courted* first!"

"Yes, exact—" Her face fell. "Wait, what?"

"I mean you're the most perfect being in the universe!" Discord said

as he paced around, his hoof and foot not touching any surface. "A mare like you needs to be *earned* through grand romantic gestures before anyone can win your hoof in marriage!"

"That's," she said, holding up her hoof, "not really what I had in…"

She yelped as Discord grabbed her hoof and yanked her off the throne. His lion arm caught her around the waist and pulled her close. Flustered, Fluttershy looked up at the god grinning mischievously down at her.

"Very well then, my dear," he said, snapping his fingers. "Let the wooing commence!"

Suddenly, they were in a marble pavilion with ionic columns entwined with vines of roses.

"Let's see," Discord said, looking around, "we have the ideal romantic setting. Now for some candlelight!"

With another snap of his fingers, candles appeared floating all around them.

"Next, music!"

A lyre and some kind of flute materialized above them and began playing slow, peaceful music.

"And finally, a dance!"

Fluttershy yelped as she was abruptly spun around and dipped below Discord's waist. "Discord! This is…"

"Exciting?" he said as he spun her again. "Thrilling?" He brought her back to his chest. "Romantic?"

Scowling, Fluttershy pushed against his chest. "As lovely as all this is, I'm just not…"

"Into dancing? Understood." He snapped the floating instruments away. "You're more into poetry, aren't you?"

He summoned a scroll and cleared his throat. " *Some say a cavalry corps,* " he recited. " *some infantry, some, again* —oh no, wait." He tossed the scroll aside. "My mistake. While I do appreciate Sapphony's work, it doesn't really fit this situation."

"Discord," Fluttershy said slowly, "if you'd let me speak…"

"Aha!" He snapped his fingers. "Perhaps I can prove my bravery by bringing you the head of a mighty beast!"

Shrieking, Fluttershy put her hoof to her mouth.

"Oh, right, right." He cringed in embarrassment. "You're an animal lover, of course." Snapping his fingers, he had another idea. "Would you like more pets?"

Fluttershy was instantly surrounded by animals. There were so many, she couldn't quite process what species they were.

"Discord," she said, gently pushing a platypus off her lap.

He clapped his hands together. "More flowers!"

Fluttershy screamed as she was showered with a countless variety of flowers. "Discord!"

"More jewels!"

In another flash, she was covered head to hoof in jewelry, from bracelets to necklaces to a pearl crown upon her head. Fluttershy's eyes glowed red, for she was unable to keep her anger in any longer.

"DISCORD!" she shouted in her Saddle Rager voice, pushing all the flowers and animals aside. "STOP IT!"

Discord was stunned into silence upon hearing her outburst. Seeing his astonished gaze, Fluttershy gasped and turned her back to him, covering her face.

Don't lose your temper, Fluttershy, she thought. *Remember what your teammates said. Letting him know your identity will give him*

power over you. Just use the techniques Tree Hugger taught you.

She took in a deep breath, her mind clearing with the help of the aroma of the hundreds of flowers surrounding her. When she opened her eyes, they were teal again. Feeling calm, she faced Discord, who was still staring at her in bewilderment.

"Please," Fluttershy said slowly. "Enough."

Discord blinked. "What was that?"

She pretended to be ignorant. "What was what?"

He pointed to her. "You…sounded different there for a moment. And your eyes, they…they changed."

She kept a stiff expression. "I have no idea what you're…"

"You're hiding something from me." He slithered over to her so that his face was in hers. "It's very… *intriguing* ." He smiled brightly. "Do you have some kind of hidden personality or something? If so, I'd *very* much like to know more about it!"

Fluttershy gently pushed his muzzle away. "These gifts are very lovely, Discord, and, frankly, it's nice that you paid attention to my interests," she said, looking around at the flowers and animals, "but I'm afraid my answer still stands. I…I don't love you, Discord. Not in the way you want me to. I'm sorry, but it's the truth."

Surprisingly, Discord didn't seem at all disappointed. "Oh, that's quite alright, my darling," he said, poofing the animals, jewels and extra flowers away. "You don't have to say yes right away." He sat down in his throne, which had suddenly appeared behind him. "I'm a patient god. It doesn't matter what you think of me right now, because I know you're going to be my wife eventually."

Once again, she was confused. "W-What?"

"The Fates have decreed us the perfect match. It's in the prophecy, don't you know?"

"Prophecy?"

He propped his elbow onto his armrest, leaning his head on his paw. "When I was turned to stone, Apollo gave a prophecy foretelling my release. It goes something like this."

Straightening up, he put his paw to his chest as he recited:

" *Two thousand times the Earth shall turn*

Before the Chaos Lord is released from stone,

When the Keeper of His Heart accepts his gifts,

He will roam free once again

And grant the pony life everlasting,

Making her his and his alone. "

He looked down at Fluttershy, seeing her eyes wide in bewilderment. "Believe me, it sounds a lot more poetic in Gracian. Even rhymes. The point is," he said, leaning forward, "we're meant for each other, Fluttershy. One day, you're going to be my immortal queen. And take it from someone who was there when Oedipus blinded himself, running from our fate won't bode well for either of us."

In a flash, he was kneeling down to her again, holding her hooves. "So why wait for the inevitable?"

She stared at him long and hard. "Are you…sure that's what the prophecy means?"

He shrugged. "What else *could* it mean? All you have to do is accept my gifts."

She blinked. "You…really don't know…"

"Know what?"

She shook her head. "Discord, there's nothing you can give me at the moment that can help me change my…"

"Then name it!" He held her hooves tighter. "Wish for the most impossible thing you've always wanted, and I'll give it to you! I'll give you anything!"

Fluttershy went still. "A-Anything?"

He grinned. "Anything."

It was a lot to consider. *If he can do anything, could he…take away my curse?*

To think she could be a normal pony again. She would never have to worry about hurting any pony ever again.

It was the most tempting thought she'd had throughout this entire ordeal.

Then another thought made her frown sadly. "You couldn't do it."

His mouth moved to match hers. "Yes, I can!"

"No." She shook her head. "You said you couldn't do anything to… change ponies."

"I could! I mean…provided you give me something in return."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

Releasing her hooves, he moved his paw and claw in illustrative motions. "See, gods are allowed to bend the rules a little bit, provided they create a divine contract with another party. For instance, Artemis once wanted me to create a new beast to scare off this stalker guy Orion. In return, she agreed to make one night a year longer than the rest so I could party in the dark longer. That's why we have the Winter Solstice." He bowed. "You're welcome.

"But we often make contracts with mortals who want impossible gifts from us. The mortals must do us favors in return. It often involves a lifetime of servitude or the selling of one's soul…" He noticed Fluttershy's uneasiness. "Not that *I* ever did something like that! Sometimes it doesn't have to be that big. Dionysus had given a king the power to turn things to gold just for letting the drunken fool crash

at his place."

"And," Fluttershy said with a gulp, "what would *you* ask for in return for… *my* wish?"

"Why," he said, chuckling, "your hoof in marriage, of course."

"Right." She supposed it silly to expect anything less. "Isn't there… some other way we can settle this without my having to marry you right away?"

"Well," he said, stroking his beard, "if I had my Amulet of Chaos, I could simply grant your wish *without* the need for a magical contract."

"Oh." She crossed her forelegs. "So this *is* about your precious amulet."

He huffed. "Well, you can't expect me to take over the mortal world without it."

She shook her head. "You know something? I was beginning to think you weren't like the Discord in the stories at all, but you're… you're just…" She grunted. "Mean!"

Turning her back to him, she shut her eyes and lifted her chin in defiance. Discord was hurt by her words, but he couldn't help but admire her boldness at the same time.

Honestly, it was *really* hard for him to be upset with her.

"Sure I wouldn't mind ruling the world again," he said, floating towards her, "but only if you'd rule it with me." Cupping her chin, he turned her face towards him. "Your boldness is only further confirming my belief on how excellent a queen you'd make."

Glancing downward, she lowered his paw. "I don't doubt your feelings for me, Discord, but this isn't the way to win my heart."

His arms drooped in exhaustion. "Then what *is* ?! Tell me what I have to do, Fluttershy!" His voice became small. "And…I'll do it."

"First of all," she said, meeting his gaze, "I am not a prize you can simply *win* . Nor am I some idol you can worship. I'm a *person,* Discord, a person you can't keep. I may not have this kind of experience, but I *do* know that love doesn't come so easily. It's not about the things you can do for me, it's…whether or not I feel comfortable around you, whether or not I can trust you." She sighed. "And I'm sorry, but at this point, these standards haven't been met."

Unable to handle the sight of his disappointment, she turned away from him again. "I don't need jewels, I don't need gifts, I don't need…to be Queen of the World. All I need is a friend I can trust my life with." She murmured the rest. "Trust my *heart* with."

As Discord listened to her words, he started to see the misery that was building up inside her. It pained him to think that he had been the cause.

He truly didn't understand how romance worked, at least not how it worked in this new era. If he was going to win her love, he had to learn the rules of this time period first.

"I…have to go."

She faced him in confusion. "What?"

He snapped his fingers, opening a swirling vortex. "I…have some errands to run. I'll be back in a bit."

She glanced at her surroundings. "Wait, you're gonna just…?"

"Just stay in this pavilion and the wandering beasts shouldn't bother you!" He paused. "Probably."

"Wait, Discord!"

But he had gone through the vortex before she could stop him. As the portal closed, Fluttershy gritted her teeth in annoyance.

"He is *really* making it hard for me to hold myself back!"

The librarian of the Maretropolis Library, a pale yellow unicorn with messy red hair and spectacles, was taken by surprise when a strange creature with a body made of several different animals suddenly appeared on her desk.

"Excuse me," Discord said, looking at the nameplate on the desk, "Miss Moondancer, but where do you keep your scrolls on romance?"

After blinking several times, Moondancer pushed her glasses back into place. "Um…we don't keep any scrolls here. We have books, DVDs, videotapes…"

"Interesting," the draconequus said, lifting the cover of one of the books on her desk. "You ponies really have come a long way, haven't you? What does DVD stand for?"

The librarian opened her mouth and then paused. "Um…it stands for, um…" She scratched her head. "Huh. You know I never really thought about…"

"Ahem. Romance?"

"Oh, yes. Are you looking for romantic fiction or relational advice?"

Discord tapped his chin. "A little bit of both, actually."

"Well, the romance section is in Aisle 7, and you can find relational advice over in Self-Help." Using her horn, she opened the drawers to the filing cabinet behind her. She spun her chair around to search through the cards. "I'm sure I could find you some recommendations if…"

"Oh, that won't be necessary! Bye!"

And then he was gone in a flash. Moondancer readjusted her glasses as she tried to sort out what had just happened.

A scream came from Aisle 7. The librarian was about to shush them when the pony shouted, "WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THE ROMANCE NOVELS?!"

Mistress Mare-velous watched as the Masked Matter-Horn, back in wings and costume, focused her magic on one of the holding cells. In its center, sitting on a pedestal, was the metal box containing the Amulet of Chaos. Surrounding it was a circle of salt lined with lit black candles. It didn't look so bad until the magic from the Matter-Horn's horn turned from magenta to black.

The beam shot towards the salt circle, instantly causing it and the candles to glow purple. The Matter-Horn panted heavily as her horn diminished.

"There," she said, pressing some buttons on the control panel beside the cell. "The spell should create a secure barrier around the amulet, and even if anyone or anything teleports within the circle, it will cast them out." The cell's force-field activated. "The force-field's just an added precaution. Even if it hadn't stopped Discord before, it will still trigger alarms. There should also be one of us patrolling the tower at all times, in case all this isn't enough."

Mare-velous shook off her astonishment from watching the spell. "Okay, we *really* need to talk about all this freaky forbidden magic you're usin'."

"Later," the alicorn said as she trotted towards the elevator. "Come on. I asked the others to meet us in the main lounge in a few minutes."

Sighing, Mare-velous stepped into the elevator with her. "At least tell me *somethin'* to assure me that you're not some dark wizard in the makin' or that you're secretly plannin' to raise the dead or somethin' like that."

The Matter-Horn did not look at her, only stared blankly ahead as the doors closed. "Let's just say that I was once…young and… foolish." She hung her head. "And it ended up costing me a friend."

Seeing that this was a painful subject for her, Mare-velous decided to drop it for the moment.

The doors opened and sure enough, the rest of the Power Ponies,

save for Saddle Rager, were gathered in the main lounge.

"The new spells should be enough to ward off Discord…" the Matter-Horn said as she and Mare-velous approached them.

Zapp huffed. "Why does *that* sound familiar?"

The alicorn cleared her throat. "Nevertheless, we should take shifts in guarding the tower. I suggest that each night some pony also sleeps here."

"Ooh!" Fili-Second cried. "Like a stakeout sleepover!"

"Did you find a spell that can get us to the Chaos Realm?" Radiance asked.

"Yes," the Matter-Horn said, levitating an old and tattered brown book from her saddlebag. "But a simple dimension-hopping spell won't be enough for us to get somewhere as remote as the Realm of Chaos."

"Did you just call a dimension-hopping spell *simple* ?" Zapp asked.

Ignoring her, the Matter-Horn flipped open to a bookmarked page. "Opening the gateway to the Realm of Chaos requires a more… complicated ritual. There are actually two rituals we can perform, but considering how rare a jellyfish heart is, we'll have to use the other one. First, we'll need to draw a spiral on the floor out of blood…"

"Say what now?" Zapp said.

"Blood?!" Radiance exclaimed at the same time as Zapp.

"Wait'll ya hear the next bit," Mare-velous murmured.

"Not just any blood," the Matter-Horn said, tracing her hoof over the words on the page. "A mixture of blood from all four races of pony: earth pony, unicorn, pegasus, and alicorn."

"Well that's just great!" Fili-Second said. "Where are we supposed to find an earth pony, unicorn, pegasus and alicorn at this hour?!"

They all stared at her. After a few seconds, Fili-Second's mouth fell open.

"Ohhhhhhhh." She giggled. "Right."

"Thing is, I'm not sure if my blood's enough," the Matter-Horn said, ruffling her feathers. "I'm not an alicorn by birth, after all."

"We've gotta at least try," Zapp said. "And I suppose Radiance and I are gonna *have* to give our blood with Fluttershy out and you representing the alicorn."

"I'd be happy to give my blood for my friends!" Fili-Second piped.

"No need, Fili," Mare-velous said. "I've already offered to do it."

"There's more," the Matter-Horn said. "At the center of the spiral, we're supposed to place a chaotic object or creature, something that defies all logic."

"What do you suppose it means by that?" Fili-Second asked, taking a lick of an ice cream cone that suddenly appeared in her hoof. She noticed everyone's eyes were on her again. "What? There something on my face?"

"Looks like you'll be playing a role in the ritual after all, Fili. Now," the Matter-Horn said, taking a series of empty blood bags out of her saddlebag, "who wants to go first?"

It was evening, and Discord lay on a cloud high above the Maretropolis Park as he read through the mountain of books he'd "borrowed" from the library. For him though, "reading" was flipping through the pages of each book in a matter of seconds. As a god, he was able to commit everything he saw and heard to memory.

"Strange," he said. "I don't know why I didn't consider meddling in romantic affairs before. Romance is even more confusing than chaos." He huffed. "Thank you, Aphrodite and Eros."

Every love story was the same. Boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in

love, there is some complication, the complication is resolved, then they live happily ever after. Of course, every now and then he found a refreshing change.

Sometimes, the main couple did not get together in the end. One story ended in the boy and girl killing themselves. Discord tossed those books aside, knowing they weren't going to be of any help.

Sometimes, it wasn't necessarily a boy and girl falling in love. Not that it really surprised Discord, for he'd known quite a few gods into that sort of thing. It just seemed to be a lot more common now than it was in his day.

Sometimes, the two romantic leads were not of the same species, which gave Discord some hope. There were some stories that reminded him of Eros and Psyche. All of them seemed to end in the beastly character becoming a pony by the end of the story.

"Is that what she wants?" Discord asked himself. "Some princely figure to save her from a miserable life of solitude?"

Then something caught his eye as he gazed down at the park below. Two mares were sitting side by side on a park bench. One was a pale yellow earth mare with a curly blue and pink mane. The other was a green unicorn with green and white hair and yellow eyes. The earth mare wore a dark uniform of some sort while the unicorn held a paper bag in her hooves. Being the ever curious god that he was, Discord made his ear grow larger so he could listen in on their conversation.

"Sorry I missed our big night out, Lyra," the earth mare said. "Miss Sparkle had quite a few errands to run this evening."

"That's okay, Bon-Bon," the unicorn, Lyra, said, using her magic to take something out of the bag. "I've got something better than a fancy spaghetti dinner!"

Bon-Bon gasped when what appeared to be knotted bread covered in cheese and some kind of red sauce was levitated into view. "Pizza pretzels!" She snatched the food. "You know what I love!"

"Yup," Lyra said, smirking as she took out her own pretzel. "Probably the only thing you love more than me."

"That's not true!" Bon-Bon said, biting into her pretzel. "Pizza pretzels are only my *third* -favorite thing."

"Oh?" The unicorn scooted closer to her. "And what's the first?"

Swallowing, Bon-Bon replied, "Chocolate bonbons, of course. Then there's you."

Lyra stiffened. "Hey!"

"You have to admit, honey," Bon-Bon said. "Bonbons are hard to beat. You oughta know." She booped her on the nose. "You married one."

Lyra stared at her and then burst out laughing. "See? We don't need to go anywhere fancy to have a good time."

"Yeah," Bon-Bon said, looking down guiltily. "I know my job can keep me…busy, sometimes. But…I'm glad that no matter how busy things can get, we always find time for each other."

"You bet," Lyra said, taking her hoof.

Discord watched in awe as the two mares rubbed each other's noses. It truly amazed him how…simple it all was. There was no candlelight, no flowers, no expensive gifts. The unicorn, who had the magic, wasn't doing anything magical to impress her partner. They were just sitting there, enjoying nothing more than a simple meal and each other's company.

And they seemed happy.

He clutched his chest, wishing he and Fluttershy could have what they had.

A candle appeared above his head and Discord cried out, "That's it!"

His sudden outburst caused Lyra and Bon-Bon to look up, but there was nothing for them to see.

"Did you hear something?" Bon-Bon asked.

Lyra shrugged. "Big park. Some pony must've gotten excited over something."

Fluttershy was scratching the Orthros' belly, smiling at how the animal was enjoying it. However, there was sadness and confusion behind that smile.

"What am I to do?" she asked the Orthros. "He won't listen to me. Now that he isn't frozen in stone, he won't listen to me." She sighed. "Maybe I *should* marry him. No, really. I mean…he cares for me. That much I know. Perhaps, in time, I could feel the same way.

"And if I marry him, he might take my curse away. I wouldn't have to worry about hurting any pony anymore. I wouldn't be a mon—"

She stopped, staring at the two-headed dog. It reminded her of the incident this morning, and what had caused for Discord to be released in the first place.

"But…I'm *not* a monster," she murmured, laying her head on the Orthros' stomach. "Not any more than you or Discord is. When I'm Saddle Rager, I *help* ponies, not hurt them. They need Saddle Rager." She closed her eyes. "My *friends* need Saddle Rager."

Her head rose up in determination. "I need to find a way out of here."

Glancing around the pavilion, she searched for an exit. Despite what Discord had told her, she had to believe there was another way out. There was nothing around the pavilion to suggest it though.

"Come on," Fluttershy said, standing up. "You can protect me in case any…less friendly beasts show up."

Walking to the edge of the pavilion, she found that there was nothing beyond it but the swirling purple void. Taking a deep breath, she flapped her wings and took off. The Orthros whimpered behind her.

"Sorry," she said, turning back to it. "Looks like I'm going to have to go at this alone."

Shaking with fear, Fluttershy flew into the void and searched all around. Random objects and creatures floated by, ones she could not describe. If she never found a way out of here, was this to be her home for the rest of eternity?

It's the place, isn't it? Discord's voice echoed throughout her head. *I can change it so it's more to your liking.*

She shook her head. "No, Fluttershy. You can't get distracted."

Her heart leapt with joy as she came across a door. Was this the way out?

Then she paused upon seeing the door's design. It was yellow, the same shade as her coat. Painted near the top were three pink butterflies. Her cutie mark.

Curious, Fluttershy slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open. What she saw made her gasp.

It was a bedroom. The walls were painted green, covered in vines of gorgeous pink and blue flowers. The large canopied bed in the center was adorned with pink petals scattered across the green bedding. A string of butterflies fluttered past Fluttershy's muzzle.

Stepping inside, Fluttershy glanced around in awe. It was like walking into a fairytale garden, only for sleeping in. It was certainly unusual, but it did not match the chaotic nature of the rest of the realm. It was peaceful and serene.

She came across a vanity made of what appeared to be oak. The mirror was made of crystal, framed with pink and blue flowers. Fluttershy ran her hoof across the wooden surface, making contact with a brush made of green crystal. Picking it up, Fluttershy noticed an engraving in the crystal. The letters looked Gracian, so she could not read it.

"It says, 'for my dearest love, Fluttershy.'"

She spun around upon hearing Discord's voice. He stood in front of her, looking down at her with solemn eyes.

"I warned you not to wander," he murmured.

"W-What," she stammered, glancing around, "what is all this?"

He held his paw out to his side. "Yours."

She blinked. "But…you said that bed I woke up in…that would be…"

"Yes. But I also figured that even if you accepted my proposal, you would not yet be comfortable with sharing a bed, so I made this room while you were out. It was meant to be an engagement gift."

Holding the brush to her chest, she said, "Y-You…made all of this… for me?"

He nodded. "I…knew you would desire something less…chaotic, so… I incorporated everything I knew about you into this room." He looked away in embarrassment. "This…this is how I feel…whenever you are with me." He held out his finger to allow a butterfly to land on it. "Peaceful, natural, even…a bit harmonious."

He watched as the butterfly flew away. "My only wish is that one day, you could…feel the same way."

As Fluttershy stared at him, she felt her heart beat heavily against the hairbrush. He faced her again, taking one hoof in his paw.

"I mean it, you know?" he said softly. "I would do anything for you."

"Even," Fluttershy murmured, "stop thinking about taking over the mortal world?"

Discord's mouth closed, which caused her to hang her head.

"See? You hesitate."

"Do…you think, though?" he said hopefully. "That one day, you could love me?"

She raised her head. "M-Maybe…one day." She locked gaze with him. "But not today."

He sighed, lifting his claw. "I waited a lifetime for you." Fluttershy closed her eyes as his talons entangled in her hair. "I can wait a little longer."

She opened her eyes. "So…what now?"

His claw stopped moving. "I…recently read a story where…a hideous creature takes a beautiful mare prisoner. As time passes, he dares to fall in love with the sweet thing." Straightening up, he backed away from her. "But he knows he cannot keep her, for every day she becomes more and more miserable. So," he said, hanging his head, "he has to do something…very hard."

Fluttershy stared up at him. "What?"

"Just to be clear," Fili-Second said, "this isn't gonna be a live sacrifice thing, is it?"

Fili-Second stood at the center of a newly-made blood spiral on the floor of the main lounge. Zapp, Mare-velous, Radiance and the Matter-Horn each had a bandage around one front knee.

"This is just to open the portal, Fili," the Matter-Horn said, setting a damp brush inside a bowl containing the mixture of their blood.

"Besides," Zapp said, "despite Discord's lack of mercy, none of the ancient texts say anything about him being interested in live sacrifices."

"If he *does* try to take ya," Mare-velous said, levitating her rope into view, "we'll stop him."

"Oh, okay," Fili-Second said, her legs shaking. "I guess?"

"Now what do we do?" Radiance asked, massaging her sore leg.

"We join hooves around the spiral," the Matter-Horn said, placing

herself at the edge of the bloody pattern, "and I will say the spell."

She sat down and held out her front hooves. Mare-velous took one and Zapp took the other. Radiance took Zapp's hoof while Humdrum took Mare-velous'. They all sat down and closed their eyes.

"This better work," Mare-velous whispered to the alicorn.

"It will," the Matter-Horn said, taking a deep breath. "Almighty Discord, Spirit of…"

Suddenly, there was a crash of lightning and a yelp from Fili-Second. Everyone opened their eyes to see a swirling vortex open right behind Fili-Second.

"Wow, that was fast!" she said, zipping over to her friends.

"But this can't be," the Matter-Horn said in confusion. "I hadn't even started…"

They were all silent as Fluttershy stepped out of the vortex. Once she was out, it closed in around her.

"FLUTTERSHY!" they all cried, rushing to embrace their friend.

"You're okay!" Fili-Second exclaimed.

"We were so worried!" Mare-velous said.

"We thought that monster might have *defiled* you!" Radiance said, looking Fluttershy over. "But oh my! Where *did* you get that gorgeous gown?"

"But how?" the Matter-Horn said, pulling away. "I mean it couldn't have been the spell. We'd barely begun it!"

"What happened in there?" Zapp asked.

"He…" Fluttershy said in a tiny voice. "He asked me to marry him."

They all gasped.

"I *knew* it!" Zapp said. "Daring Do told us about the prophecy."

"Then what happened?" Mare-velous asked.

Fluttershy hung her head. "I said no."

Radiance huffed. "I *knew* you wouldn't give into that monster so easily."

"Then what happened?" Humdrum asked.

"Did you beat him up?" Fili-Second asked, looking a little too excited.

Fluttershy shook her head. "He let me go."

All were silent.

"It's true," Fluttershy said. "Once I explained that I didn't share his feelings, he opened the portal and let me go."

"Just…like that?" Mare-velous asked.

Nodding, Fluttershy started walking away from them. "Just like that."

They watched her go, unsure of what to say or think.

"Hang on!" Zapp shouted, holding up her bandaged leg. "You mean to tell me that we just gave our blood for *nothing* ?!"

It was Saturday afternoon and Fluttershy still hadn't come out of her room. Worried, Applejack went in to check on her. Fluttershy sat at her window, petting Angel on her lap as she stared wistfully out. Sighing, Applejack slowly approached her.

"Sugar," she said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell ya what I knew about…you and Discord."

"I'm not mad at you, Applejack," Fluttershy said with a shake of her head. "You were just trying to protect me."

Applejack hung her head. "Hell of a lotta good *that* did." She looked at her roommate. "Look, I know what happened may have been…

overwhelmin', but it's been almost a week now. Ya haven't been to work, ya haven't joined us on any of our missions, and ya haven't gone outside."

Fluttershy looked down at the bunny on her lap. "He…he *loves* me, Applejack." She closed her eyes. "He looked so…sad when he let me go. I know. I saw his eyes. There was no pretending. I…I know he's supposed to be evil, kidnapping me was wrong and he still wants to take over the world, but…I can't help but think that… somewhere deep down, he…"

She trailed off, unsure of how to finish her thought. Applejack laid a hoof on her shoulder.

"Do you love him?"

Fluttershy stopped her petting. "I…care for him, at the very least."

Applejack nodded in understanding. "Ya have the biggest heart I know, Fluttershy. That's…why I waited so long to tell ya. I…was worried ya'd let him out as soon as ya knew ya could."

"It didn't matter if I knew or not. It happened." She opened her eyes. "All because…for once in my life…I accepted myself for who I was."

Wrapping a hoof around her friend's neck, Applejack said, "Ya know, he could've taken away yerr…gift, if ya'd asked him. Why didn't ya?"

Fluttershy gazed out at the cityscape. "For years, I wanted nothing more than to be normal again, to have what was done to me be undone. But…after all I'd been able to do as Saddle Rager, when I…finally had the opportunity to get what I wanted, I realized that…" She turned to Applejack. "I didn't want it anymore."

Grinning, the earth mare hugged her tighter. "Ya can't spend all yerr time in here mopin' about it though. Ya should at least get some air to clear yerr head."

Sighing, Fluttershy said. "You're right." She stood up. "I'll go take Wynona for a walk."

But she soon discovered that not even the fresh air, the flora of the

park, or the cheerful panting of the dog whose leash she held could cheer her up. All of it reminded her of the Realm of Chaos, and all the gifts Discord had given her.

I need to stop thinking about him, she told herself. *Though it is strange how no one seems to have heard from him over the past few days. I really thought he'd at least be causing mischief. I hope he's not too heartbroken about…*

She shook her head. *No. It wouldn't have worked out. You were right to say no to him. It's your life, and he should respect that. Besides, it's not as if you were truly in l—*

Her thoughts were interrupted when she collided into some pony, causing her to fall and let go of the leash.

"Eep!" she cried, hearing rapid barking. "Wynona!"

Just then, the end of the leash, encased in blue magic, floated in front of her. Looking up, Fluttershy's eyes met a pair of bright red ones. The eyes belonged to a unicorn stallion with a smooth gray coat and a short, but neat, jet black mane. His horn was lit up with the same blue magic that had the leash. Upon squinting, Fluttershy realized the horn was unusually blue too.

"Fear not, milady," the stallion said in a deep, rich voice. "Your hound has been apprehended."

Giving her a warm smile, he held out his hoof. Blushing, Fluttershy took it and allowed him to lift her up.

"She's…not my hound, err, dog," Fluttershy stammered, taking the leash. "She's my roommate's."

"Terribly sorry for colliding into you, Miss," the stallion said sincerely, "but I was so taken in by the wondrous sights, I wasn't looking where I was going."

"No, no, no, the fault was mine," Fluttershy said with a small giggle. "Though I can understand. The park is very beautiful."

He locked gaze with her. "I wasn't referring to the park."

Fluttershy's cheeks flushed pinker as she gazed into those bright red eyes. Something about them felt familiar.

"H-Have…have we met?"

He gently took her hoof. "I think I would remember meeting such a lovely specimen of pony-kind."

He took her by surprise again as he pressed his lips lightly to her hoof. Fluttershy reluctantly glanced at his flank, seeing a cutie mark of a cyclone.

"Perhaps," he said smoothly, lowering her hoof, "I could make up for this incident…over dinner?"

Unable to hide her blush anymore, Fluttershy looked away shyly. "I…don't even know your name."

"My friends call me…Delancey," he said, frowning slightly. "Of course, they *would* if I had any friends."

"Oh," Fluttershy said, saddened by this confession. "W-Well, D-Delancey," she said, shaking his hoof, "you've made at least…one friend today."

He grinned. "I'm glad to hear that, Miss…"

"F-Fluttershy," she said, brushing a lock of hair out of her face.

"Fluttershy," he said with a sigh. "Such a pretty name." He kissed her hoof again, making her heart skip a beat. "I think we'll get along just swimmingly."

"Twilight?" Spike called, opening the door to his guardian's study.

"What is it, Spike?" Twilight asked, looking up from her desk. "Trouble?"

"No. At least," he said as he closed the door behind him, "it *could* be trouble."

She leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

Gulping, Spike held his tablet out to her. "You should have a look at this."

Twilight took the tablet with her magic. The screen showed a news story from the *Canterlot Times.* The headline alone made her eyes widen: *Dark Magic-User Granted Early Parole for Good Behavior.*

She skimmed through the article, her eyes lingering for several moments on a black-and-white mugshot.

"Should…we be worried?" Spike asked.

"For now?" Twilight said, setting down the tablet. "No."

"But," he said, biting his claw tips nervously, "if she's back, won't she come after you?"

She shook her head as she stood up. "The article says she was let out on good behavior." She made her way over to the bookshelf. "Hopefully, she's put everything behind her."

"And…if she hasn't?"

Her hoof ran along the spine of the book *Don't Cry After Sunset.* "Then I'll be ready for her."

Credit to DemonWriterX and their fanfic *Pomegranate Seeds* for inspiring some of the scenes in this chapter. Also to the original *Batman* movie with Adam West and the Dreamworks movie *Megamind.*

The poem Discord started to recite was "To an army wife, in Sardis" by Sappho.

This is the end of this Discord arc, but I guarantee you, it's not the last we'll see of him.

Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 1

" *Relationships survive on trust, and if that is broken at any point, it's pretty much the end of the relationship. Besides, inability to communicate leads to problems."*

- Yuvraj Singh

It was night at the Canterlot Museum of Magic, and the security guards were making their rounds. One guard, a green earth mare with a brown mane tied up in a bun, turned the corner into the Norwhinnean Mythology exhibit. Letting out a yawn, she shined her flashlight on the artifacts: a sculpture of Freya, a stone detailing Ragnarok, a pair of iron gauntlets, and an ancient spear.

A noise sounding like a hoof slipping made her jump. The guard spun around, sweeping her light down the two intersecting hallways. Seeing nothing, she shrugged and turned back to the exhibit.

Then her face grew pale.

"Uh, Lens?" she said into her walkie-talkie. "Is there anyone else in the Norwhinnean exhibit besides me?"

" *Uh…no,* " a male voice said through the device. " *According to the cameras, you're the only one anywhere near that area, Searchlight. Why?* "

"Well, either invisibility is a secret power of Thor's Gauntlets," Searchlight said, pointing her flashlight towards an empty display case, "or they've just been stolen."

"You sure everything's alright over there?" Twilight asked into her cell as she pulled on a purple evening dress.

" *Sure, sure,* " said Spike's voice on the other end. " *Radiance and I just took care of some thugs. Nothing big, just your run-of-the-mill bank robbery.* "

"That's it?" she asked, using her magic to put on some black flats. "No supervillain activity? Mane-iac, Trixie?"

" *Nope. All in Balkham.* "

"What about Discord?"

" *Still no activity from him.* "

"No natural disasters? Because if there are, I could totally fly over there right now!"

" *We're* fine *, Twilight. Zapp, Radiance, Saddle and I've got everything under control. You just relax, have a good time.* "

"Yeah, sure, relax. I can do that. I can…" Twilight froze as she caught her frazzled reflection in the mirror of her hotel room. "No, I can't."

She heard Spike sigh. " *Twilight, it'll be fine.* "

"No, it won't be."

" *Twilight, it's been almost a month. Plus ten years. Just talk to her.* "

"Oh, right, sure," Twilight said, rolling her eyes. "And what am I supposed to say? 'Hi, remember me? The mare who practically ruined your…?'"

A knock at the door interrupted her.

"Twilight?" said Officer Flash Sentry's voice. "You ready? Lyra and Bon-Bon are waiting for us in the lobby."

"Coming!" Twilight called before returning to her phone conversation. "You'll call me the minute there's trouble, okay?"

" *Twilight,* " Spike said in a stern voice. " *Go.* "

"But what if…? Hello?"

The long tone ended the conversation for her. Sighing, Twilight hung up and slid the phone into the pink purse hanging from her shoulder. Looking into the mirror, she put on a big smile before walking to the door and opening it. Flash, wearing a dashing black suit and blue tie, greeted her with a smile.

"You look great," he said.

"Thank you," Twilight said, grinning back as she closed the door. "Let's go."

"I must say," Bon-Bon said, "it's nice to be in the backseat for once."

Twilight and Flash were in the back of a rented limo with Twilight's driver, Bon-Bon, and her partner, Lyra. The two mares were gussied up, Bon-Bon wearing a pink ruffled dress and Lyra wearing a matching yellow one.

"So Lyra, you and Twilight went to school together?" Flash asked.

"Oh yeah," Lyra said. "We weren't that close. I mean we did hang out a couple times. The first year, we sat with four other fillies at lunch, but that was before Twilight started hanging out with…"

"It's uncanny, isn't it?!" Twilight said quickly. She cleared her throat. "I mean…when I hired Bon-Bon to be my driver, I of course had no idea she was in a relationship with one of my old schoolmates. Funny how things turn out, huh?"

She nudged Flash so hard he fell sideways into the minibar.

"Oops," she said, bringing her hoof to her mouth. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Flash said, massaging his foreleg. "Thanks for inviting me to your school reunion. I can't wait to meet the rest of your schoolmates."

"Can you believe it's been ten years?" Lyra asked. "Seems like only

yesterday I was taking that entrance exam." She sighed dreamily. "It'll be nice to see every pony again: Twinkleshine, Lemon Hearts, Minuette, Moondancer, Sun—"

"Some night, huh?" Twilight said with a laugh, looking out the window. "Isn't Canterlot lovely at night?"

"Sure is," Flash said. "Apparently, there's been some serious crime going on in this town at night."

Twilight looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard?" Bon-Bon said, pulling up her phone. "There was a robbery last night at the Canterlot Museum of Magic. It's all over the news."

She showed Twilight her screen with the article. Twilight's eyes widened as they read through the tiny text.

"Someone stole Járngreipr?" she said.

Flash chuckled. "I think you're the first pony I've met able to pronounce it. Took forever for the chief to tell me about it just because of that word."

"Yarn-what-now?" Lyra asked.

"The Iron Gauntlets of Thor," Twilight explained, "the Norwhinnean God of Thunder. It was said that the gauntlets were what allowed Thor to wield his hammer, protecting his hooves from the lightning. But they are presumably useless without the hammer. Why would some pony steal them?"

Flash shrugged. "About ninety-five percent of the time, it's about money. I'd check it out myself, but this city isn't in my jurisdiction. Besides," he said, throwing his hoof around Twilight, "I'm off-duty for the weekend."

"Off-duty," Twilight muttered under her breath.

She kept glancing at Bon-Bon's phone throughout the drive, even after it was put away in her purse.

"Ah, it's just how I remember it!" Lyra said, taking in the sight of the decorated gymnasium.

Twilight looked around. "Honestly, in all my years at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, I didn't spend much time in the gym."

Lyra giggled as she whispered to Flash, "Except for those scholastic decathlons and science fairs."

Flash smirked at Twilight. "I took you for a brainiac."

Twilight blushed. "Is that a good thing?"

"Of course." He hooked his foreleg in hers. "You don't get to be one of the richest mares in the world without having brains."

"TWILIGHT SPARKLE!"

Before Twilight could see the source of the voice, she was tackled to the ground. She looked up to find herself face to face with a blue unicorn mare with blue and white hair.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" she exclaimed, smiling brightly. "It's been so long!"

Laughing, Twilight stood herself up. "Nice to see you too, uh…" Squinting, she tried to put a name to the face. "Um…"

"Minuette!" the blue unicorn said, pointing to herself. "Don't you remember? We used to sit next to each other at lunch!"

"Of course!" Twilight said, clapping her hooves together. "Minuette!"

"And Lyra!" Minuette said, hugging her other old friend. "You look beautiful!"

"So do you!" Lyra said, admiring her dark blue gown. "Is the rest of the gang here?"

"Over here!" a voice called.

Two more unicorn mares joined their party. One was yellow with a curly blue mane, and the other looked like her twin, only her coat was white and her mane was pink.

"Lemon Hearts!" Lyra shouted excitedly. "Twinkleshine!"

The five unicorn friends all hugged each other. Flash couldn't help but notice that Twilight, though smiling, looked a tad uncomfortable. Bon-Bon cleared her throat.

"Oh, right!" Lyra said, pulling away from the group. "Every pony, this is Bon-Bon, my partner."

Lemon Hearts gasped while Minuette laughed.

"I *knew* it!" the latter said. "I *told* you she preferred mares! Pay up!"

Groaning, Twinkleshine tossed her a bit.

"You knew?" Lyra asked, blinking. "I didn't even know until after college!"

"We guessed," Minuette said with a shrug. "We made the same bet on Twilight."

"What?" Twilight said.

Twinkleshine smirked as she sized up Flash. "Looks like I get my bit back."

Minuette sighed as she gave the bit back to her. "Fair enough."

Shaking off the awkwardness, Twilight placed her hoof on Flash's shoulder. "This is Flash Sentry."

"Nice," Twinkleshine said, shaking his hoof and winking at Twilight. "*Very* nice."

"All we're missing is Moondancer," Lyra said.

"She hasn't arrived yet," Lemon Hearts said. "But she did RSVP."

"Lemon Hearts put this whole event together," Lyra explained to

Bon-Bon and Flash.

"I really gotta thank you, Twilight," Lemon Hearts said, pointing to the buffet table on the other side of the room, "for suggesting those caterers to me at the last minute."

"Yeah, their food is *amazing* !" Minuette said, taking a bite into an apple fritter. "Where did you find them?"

"Oh," Twilight said, casting a sideways glance at the buffet. "They've worked for me on a few…events."

Meanwhile, at the buffet table, Pinkie and Applejack were in white servers' uniforms while serving food to the guests.

"Hey, look, it's Twilight!" Pinkie exclaimed, waving her hoof. "Hiya, Twi—!"

Applejack plugged her hoof into her mouth. "Remember what Twilight said. We need to act like we don't know her on a personal level. If our secret identities become too friendly in everyday life," she leaned forward to whisper, "we'll risk exposin' ourselves as the Power Ponies."

Pinkie groaned as she popped Applejack's hoof out. "That shouldn't be *too* hard. We hardly know *anything* about Twilight *personally* . I mean we know her ultra-super-secret identity and all that, but we don't know what she was like as a filly or even her ultra-super-secret origin story. I mean she knows a lot about *us* but we hardly know a thing about *her* ."

"We gotta respect her privacy," Applejack murmured, lowering her eyes. "Keep a lookout for that unicorn she was talkin' about."

Nodding, Pinkie glanced at the picture in her hoof. "She doesn't *look* like a dangerous criminal. She's actually kinda cute."

"Looks can be deceivin', Pinkie. Remember the Sirens?"

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at her. "Too soon, AJ. Too soon."

On the other side of the room, Twilight was catching up with her

friends.

"So you're a dentist now?" Twilight asked Minuette.

"You always *did* take care of your teeth," Lyra said.

"And what do *you* do, Lyra?" Minuette asked.

"I work in a music store while Bon-Bon here is Twilight's chauffeur."

"And Lemon Hearts, you work in the Canterlot Castle?" Twilight asked.

"Mmm-hmm," Lemon Hearts said. "I help with all the big events: galas, banquets, that sort of thing."

"Lemony was always the best at throwing parties," Twinkleshine commented. "Meanwhile, I'm a vice-president at the hoof-polish factory." She turned to Twilight. "But I'm sure that's nothing compared to *your* success."

Twilight blushed. "Oh, it's nothing."

"You kidding?!" Minuette exclaimed. "When I told my coworkers I used to be friends with one of the richest, most influential ponies in the world, they didn't believe me!" She suddenly gasped as she looked over Twilight's shoulder. "Moondancer!"

She zipped off and came back with a pale yellow mare with thick-rimmed glasses. Her red mane was combed in a similar fashion to Twilight's, and her dress was a simple black one that went up to her neck and covered the upper part of her forelegs.

"Moondancer, hi!" Twilight said, hugging her. "I haven't seen you in such a long time!"

Moondancer narrowed her purple eyes. "I work at the Maretropolis Library. You see me almost every day."

Twilight's cheeks turned red. "Oh, um…of course! Right!"

"We should take a picture!" Minuette said, levitating her phone into

view. "Now that the gang's all here!"

The six unicorns crowded together while Minuette's phone floated above them.

"Smile!" she said.

The cell flashed in their eyes.

"Interesting you should still include Twilight as part of the gang," Moondancer said.

Flash frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm simply saying," Moondancer said, pushing her glasses up her nose, "Twilight was a member of our social group only for our first year at this school, before she won the scholastic decathlon and became friends with…"

"I'm hungry!" Twilight interjected, taking her stallion's hoof. "Flash, let's go see what's at the buffet!"

Before Flash could say anything, he was dragged to the table, where Twilight immediately stuffed a whole apple fritter into her mouth.

"What was that about?" he asked.

Swallowing, Twilight replied, "Nothing. Just…some stupid thing that happened in the past."

Her eyes darted frantically around the room.

"So…I take it you had some falling out with them some time ago?" Flash asked.

Twilight shook her head. "I never meant to hurt them. It's just…you know, when you take an interest in…big things, you…tend to forget about…other things."

"I get it." Smiling, Flash gently laid his hoof on her shoulder. "You got so swept up in your studies that you didn't make enough time for

friends."

She sighed. "It's not just that. You see…"

"Twilight!"

Closing her eyes, Twilight mumbled, "Celestia, *please* , not now."

Starlight Glimmer walked up to her side. "I am *so* happy you were able to make it tonight, what with the busy schedule we successful businessponies have to keep."

Groaning, Twilight put on a bright smile before turning to her. "Starlight! A pleasure, as always!"

Flash glanced between the two mares. "You and Starlight Glimmer of Glimmer Industries went to school together?"

"You could say that," Twilight said.

"But we weren't friends or anything," Starlight said, waving her hoof. "Twilight was placed in Princess Celestia's exclusive *advanced* class, and I wasn't. She barely knew I existed." She used her magic to grab a cucumber sandwich. "A little unfair, if you ask me, that the princess should play favorites, just because *some* lucky ponies have stronger…talents."

Twilight tried hard to keep up her smile as she watched Starlight bite into her sandwich.

"But clearly," Starlight said, wiping the crumbs off her face with a napkin, "it doesn't matter what your educational level in school. I'm living proof of that. After all," she smirked at Twilight, "being advanced doesn't necessarily mean you *will* advance. Remember what happened to your…marefriend."

Flash cocked an eyebrow. "Marefriend?"

"She means platonically," Twilight said hastily, not taking her eyes off Starlight.

"I read the papers," Starlight said, pouring herself a glass of punch.

"Honestly, if she dares to show her face here tonight after what she did…"

"Come on, Flash!" Twilight said, grabbing his hoof again. "Let's see what other food there is!" She darted her eyes at Starlight. "While I still have my appetite."

They came to the far end of the table, near the stage. Twilight used her magic to pick up a daffodil and daisy sandwich while looking around the room again.

"Who are you looking for?" Flash asked.

"Hmm?" Twilight said, turning to him.

He shrugged. "You seem to be looking for someone. Old boyfriend?"

"What? No!"

"Not that I'm jealous!" He held up his hooves defensively. "I mean we're both adults. It's understandable if you've been in past relationships."

Twilight bit her lip. "Actually…you're the first stallion I've…"

He looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

She shook her head. "That's not important!"

"Then…who *are* you looking for?"

"No pony," Twilight said, raising the sandwich to her lips.

He raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Twilight. What's going on? You've seemed distracted all night."

"I'm fine!"

She shoved the sandwich into her mouth and then her eyes opened wide. Sticking out her tongue, she revealed a small, thin piece of paper. Flash stared at it in confusion while Twilight levitated it off her tongue.

"I've heard of fortune cookies," he said, "but fortune *sandwiches* ?"

Unrolling the paper, Twilight read the tiny words aloud. " *I am often called, but never by name.* "

Flash cocked his head. "What does *that* mean?"

Twilight glanced around the room in thought. Then her eyes fell upon the stage. The blue velvet curtains were drawn, but she could've sworn she'd seen them move. Narrowing her eyes in suspicion, Twilight slid the paper into her pocket and approached the stage.

Opening the curtains with her magic, she looked to her left and right. Backstage was dark, and she could only make out the faint outlines of ropes and sandbags and old set pieces. Powering her horn to illuminate the place, she stepped forward, letting the curtains close behind her.

Suddenly, her ear twitched as it picked up the sound of a hooffall. Her horn glowed bright red as she spun around.

"Surprise!"

Her light dimmed when she saw who it was.

"You…you came."

There was a low female chuckle. "Did you really think I would miss this?" The voice tsked. "Twilight, Twilight, Twilight."

The figure stepped into the light. It was a unicorn mare with a golden coat, yellow and red hair that in Twilight's red light resembled fire. Her green eyes stared at her in the dark, and her face held a sinister smirk.

"I've waited a long, *long* time for this moment," the mare said slowly.

Twilight took a fearful step back. Then the mare's smirk turned into a happy smile.

"Gosh, it's great to see you!"

The excited tone in her voice caught Twilight off-guard. She was even more surprised when the mare threw her hooves around her and held her tight.

"It's been so many years!" Twilight could feel tears dripping onto her shoulders. "I was worried you had forgotten about me like you forgot about all those others!"

The warm hug comforted Twilight enough to diminish her horn. After about a minute, she smiled along with the mare and returned her embrace.

"Who could ever forget *you* , Sunset?"

Flash stared at the curtains behind which Twilight had disappeared. She'd been gone for several minutes and he was about to go search for her when she came out with another unicorn in a plum evening gown. The two mares were laughing as they walked foreleg in foreleg off the stage and towards him.

"A *curtain* call!" Twilight exclaimed. "Pretty clever, Sunset."

"Clearly not clever enough," Sunset said, nudging her shoulder with hers, "if you were able to figure it out in a matter of seconds."

"But to hide the paper in my sandwich… How could you have even known I would pick that sandwich?"

"Twilight. Daffodil and daisy sandwiches have *always* been your favorite."

"Yes, but…how could you have predicted that I would pick that *exact* sandwich on that *exact* plate before any pony else?"

"When are you going to learn, Twilie?" Sunset said, shaking her head. "I know you better than you know yourself."

She booped her on the nose, making Twilight giggle.

"Ahem," Flash said, clearing his throat.

"Oh!" Twilight said, gesturing between him and the mare. "Flash Sentry, this is Sunset Shimmer. Sunset, this is Flash, my…" She hesitated, her hoof going in circles. "Um…"

"We're together," Flash said, snaking his hoof around Twilight's waist.

Sunset's smile seemed to waver as she sized him up and down. "A police officer, Twi? I would've expected you to choose a scientist, a historian, someone with a career more at…your level."

Flash blinked. "How did you know I was a police officer?"

Her eyes glanced down to his coat. "Badge."

Flash opened up his jacket and stared at the pocket where his badge was well tucked in. "But…it's not even in plain view. How did you…?"

"Sunny's pretty observant," Twilight said. "When we first met, she'd already guessed I had a big brother who was in love with my babysitter."

Sunset rolled her eyes. "I never *guess* , Twilight. I *know* . Like I *knew* you were going to find my little note in that sandwich."

"That was you?" Flash asked.

"It's this game we used to play when we were foals," Twilight said. "We'd challenge each other with brain teasers and riddles."

Sunset flipped her mane. "I may have gone easy on you this time. After all, I didn't want to be waiting behind that curtain for *too* long."

Twilight scoffed. "How many times have I told you, Sunny, do *not* try to make things easy for me! You know I like a challenge!"

"So sorry," Sunset said with a smirk. "Perhaps next time, I should create a maze with a minotaur in it."

Shaking her head, Twilight said, "Minotaurs aren't a threat. They just *act* tough by yelling a lot."

"Not if he stole your daffodil and daisy sandwich," Sunset said, cozying up to her.

Giggling, Twilight playfully pushed her away. "You're *awful* !"

"I know." She batted her eyes. "But you love me anyway."

As the two of them laughed, Flash looked between them incredulously.

"So, um…how do you know Twilight?" Flash asked.

A look of fear flashed upon Twilight face for a moment, but she quickly grinned again. "We were college roommates."

Sunset scoffed. " *And* BFFs since our first year at this school!"

"Not at first though," Twilight said with a chuckle. "See, Sunset and I were both in Celestia's advanced class, and…she didn't like me very much."

"It was nothing personal," Sunset said, waving her hoof. "At my previous school, I'd been at the top of my class, but when I saw how brilliant Twilight was and how much Princess Celestia favored her, I felt a little…threatened."

"It wasn't until after I beat her in the final event of the scholastic decathlon that we became friends."

"Huh?" Flash said in confusion.

"It may sound backwards," Sunset said, throwing her hoof around her friend's shoulder, "but seeing her beat me at my best event was…eye-opening. No pony had beaten me at anything involving magic or math or science before. It gave me reason to appreciate and admire her as an intellectual equal." She pressed Twilight close to her shoulder. "We'd been inseparable ever since."

Flash was not one to be paranoid, but he could've sworn the glance Sunset cast him was almost…spiteful. He also couldn't help but notice how many of the other guests seemed to be staring at her. A group of unicorn mares spoke to each other in low whispers, their

eyes narrowed.

Pinkie was watching Sunset too. "Hey, isn't that the mare we're supposed to be looking for?"

Applejack looked up from the table to see Sunset Shimmer with Twilight. She glanced at the picture in her hooves.

"Looks like."

Pinkie cocked her head. "Is it just me or do she and Twilight seem kinda…chummy?"

As she said this, Twilight and Sunset started laughing together, their hooves entwined. It made Applejack raise her eyebrow.

"I don't get it," Pinkie said, scratching her head. "If Twilight wanted us to keep an eye on her, why doesn't she seem so afraid of her?"

"Twilight *did* say she was some pony from her past," Applejack said.

"So Twilight's friends with a…dark wizard?"

"When do you suppose Princess Celestia's coming?" Twilight asked Sunset. "I was sure she was going to be here tonight."

Sunset shrugged. "Probably fashionably late, as usual." She frowned slightly. "I just hope she isn't… *too* disappointed to see me."

"Why would she be disappointed to see you?" Flash asked.

"Gah!" Sunset screamed, turning around to face him. "Oh, you're still here."

Twilight smiled awkwardly. "Err, Flash, would you mind getting us some punch?"

"Um…" Flash said, glancing between the two of them. "Sure…okay."

Hesitantly, he headed for the punch bowl.

"Not very assertive for a cop," Sunset whispered.

Twilight nudged her in the side. "That's not very nice."

"I'm just saying," Sunset replied, rolling her eyes, "while I would've expected you to move on at this point, I didn't think you'd pick some pony so…bland."

Twilight folded her forelegs.

"I'm just kidding, Sparkle. He seems nice, I'll give him that." She muttered under her breath, "You could use someone nice."

There was silence between them for a long while.

"How…how are you doing?" Twilight asked, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "You know, now that you're…"

Sunset glanced at the unicorns whispering and pointing at her. "That answer your question?" She sighed. "You make *one* mistake ten years ago, and no pony ever lets you live it down."

"Right." Twilight bit her lip. "Mistake."

Silence again.

"Sunset, I'm…"

A sudden crash interrupted the party. Every pony spun around to a gaping hole in the wall. When the dust cleared away, a unicorn all too familiar to Twilight stood upon an octopus-like machine with eight mechanical arms, four of them acting as legs to hold her and the control platform up.

"Fear not, fellow schoolmates!" she said. "Your best friend, the Great and Powerful Trixie, has arrived!"

Scowling, Twilight whispered into her commlink, "Spike! You told me Trixie was still in Balkham!"

There was awkward laughter on the other end. " *Oops.* "

"What's *she* doing here?" Pinkie asked.

"Don't any of you remember me?" Trixie addressed the crowd. "Trixie was in your class!"

" *That* was in our class?!" a voice called.

Starlight huffed. "As if having *one* criminal in our year wasn't enough."

Starlight was about to eat her words as one of the mechanical arms grabbed her and pulled her up towards Trixie.

"None of you ever noticed Trixie, did you?" she shouted, pointing down at all of them. "No pony even thought to invite her! Well, you'll all be sorry you ignored the Great and Powerful Trixie!"

Pinkie and Applejack ducked under the buffet table. Twilight was about to slip away too when Sunset unexpectedly grabbed her hoof.

"You always were quite the drama queen, weren't you, Trixie?"

Trixie turned her attention to Sunset and smiled wickedly. "Ah, Sunset Shimmer." She made the machine trudge towards her, forcing the guests to scatter out of the way. "The Queen Bee herself. Never *once* gave Trixie the time of day. Trixie hears you turned out just as bad as Trixie. Did some time in the clink."

Flash, still wishing he had brought his gun, looked over at Sunset with wide eyes. She did not let Trixie's comment faze her. She was standing strong and staring hard at her with narrowed eyes.

"I paid my debt to society," Sunset said, taking a step forward. "It's time *you* finished doing the same."

Trixie laughed. "And what are *you* going to do about it? This isn't Maretropolis! There are no Power Ponies around to save you!"

"Maybe not, Trixie, but you still neglected to see one important thing."

Two of the mechanical arms moved to make it look like they were on

the machine's hips. "And what's that?"

Sunset smirked as she powered her horn. "You just crashed a party for Equestria's most gifted and talented unicorns."

She shot a beam at the machine, setting one of the arms ablaze. Trixie shrieked as she attempted to shake the flames off.

"Come on, ponies!" Sunset shouted to the crowd. "Are we gonna let this jerk ruin our night?"

The unicorns yelled as they ignited their horns and started firing at Trixie. Screaming, Trixie tried to dodge the attacks, but there were too many coming at her. Mare-velous and Fili-Second popped out from behind the buffet table but then their jaws dropped when they saw the unicorns ganging up on the villain.

"Um…are we needed?" Fili-Second asked.

"Reckon not," Mare-velous said, going back under the table.

Twilight looked down as Sunset clutched her hoof tighter.

"What do you say, Sparkle?" Sunset said with a grin. "We finish her off like old times?"

Twilight returned her smile. "Like old times."

She pressed herself to Sunset's side and leaned her head close enough for their horns to touch. Their green and pink magic sparked to life, creating a swirling red ball of light. Several unicorns stopped their attacks to watch the magical display in awe. The ball rose high above the crowd before lunging towards Trixie.

"Eep!" Trixie cried, shielding herself with the mechanical arms.

When the ball hit her, there was an explosion. Every pony shielded their eyes from the blinding red light. When the light diminished, the machine's mechanical arms were wrapped around Trixie like cocoon. Every pony cheered and laughed.

"Well, well, well, Trixie," Sunset said, walking towards the trapped

villain. "Now I'm starting to see why you didn't make it to graduation."

Trixie wailed in agony as she writhed in her bounds. "The Great and Powerful Trixie swears, Sunset Shimmer, once Trixie defeats the Masked Matter-Horn, you're next on her hit list!" She glared at the unicorn standing beside Sunset. "You too, Twilight Sparkle!"

Twilight couldn't hold back her laughter. Sunset chuckled along with her.

"Still got it," Sunset said. "Eh, Sparkle?"

"Yeah," Twilight said, smiling at her. "Still got it."

After calling the authorities, Flash rushed to see if Twilight was okay. He stopped a few feet away from her, his eyes focused on how tightly she was holding Sunset's hoof.

"Goodness, what happened here?" Princess Celestia said as she entered the gym.

Ten minutes later, the police were hauling Trixie away, using their magic to carry her and the robotic wreckage as they tossed her into the paddy wagon.

"You may have been able to escape Balkham Asylum, Trixie," Princess Celestia said in a stoic tone. "Let's see how you fare in the Canterlot Maximum Security Prison."

Trixie growled. "You *never* liked me, Princess! Always playing favorites!"

As the door slammed on her, Starlight, who was watching from a few feet away, snickered. "If *that* were the case, she wouldn't have locked away one of her prized pupils."

Flash, hearing her from a short distance away, gave her a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Twilight didn't tell you?" Starlight glanced over at Twilight, who was talking to Sunset on the school steps. "About ten years ago, when those two were in college, Sunset Shimmer was caught practicing dark magic in her dorm."

Flash's eyes widened.

"That's right," Starlight said with a nod. "As soon as Princess Celestia heard, she sent Sunset straight to Canterlot Maximum Security Prison. I'm surprised you didn't hear about it in the tabloids at least. She was just given early parole a few weeks ago."

He looked to where the two mares were conversing, feeling uneasy.

"Though I must say," Starlight said with a shrug, "I had my doubts about Sunset Shimmer being invited to this reunion. However, it looks like she's decided to move forward from her past. I admire that in a mare."

That did not settle Flash's stomach.

Meanwhile, Twilight was saying to Sunset, "That was amazing, what you did back there, influencing the others to retaliate."

Sunset waved her hoof nonchalantly. "Like I'm gonna take orders from the likes of *her* . Besides, any pony would've done the same thing. I mean, it they had the guts, that is."

Twilight smiled. "You really haven't changed much."

"Oh, yes I have," Sunset said, giving her a serious look. "Didn't you read the tabloids?"

The smile was instantly replaced with a guilty frown.

"You know," Sunset said, looking down at the steps, "as great as it is to see you, I wish I'd been able to see you earlier." She locked gaze with Twilight. "I was allowed visitors, you know?"

Biting her lip, Twilight said, "I…didn't think you'd *want* to see me after…"

She trailed off when she felt Sunset's hoof touch her shoulder.

"Twilight," Sunset said slowly, "I don't blame you for what happened.

She blinked. "You…don't?"

Sunset shook her head. "Why do you think I never told the police about you? You had your whole life ahead of you. Just because I was going down didn't mean I was going to take you with me. Still, it was pretty lonely in that cell."

Her hoof tightened around Twilight's shoulder. Glancing down at it, Twilight quickly shook the hoof off.

"But," Sunset said, her smile returning, "if you want to make up for lost time, I'll be in Maretropolis next week for business."

Using her magic, Sunset took a business card out of her pocket and floated it into Twilight's hoof.

"'Magic Consultant?'" Twilight said, reading the card.

Sunset nodded. "I figured with my magical knowledge, I can help other unicorns improve their own magical abilities." She winked. "Not that *you* need any help."

Twilight grinned. "I'll call you if I do though."

A limo pulled up in front of the school's steps.

"Looks like your ride's here," Sunset said.

"Looks like," Twilight said. "Catch you later?"

"Not if I catch you first, Sparkle." Sunset smirked as she walked away.

Twilight gave her old friend a wave. When Sunset was far away enough, Twilight looked to where Applejack and Pinkie were loading their truck.

"Great job on the catering, girls!" Twilight said loudly as she trotted

over to them. "The food was delicious!"

When she was certain they were out of earshot, Twilight leaned forward to whisper, "Before you turn in tonight, I need you to check something out for me."

"You okay?" Flash asked as he and Twilight walked down the hallway of hotel rooms.

"Hmm?" Twilight said, snapping out of her daze. "Oh, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You've been awfully quiet since we left the reunion."

"Right. I'm just disappointed that it had to end so early."

"Yeah," Flash said, glancing at his hooves. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself."

They stopped at a door.

"Well," Twilight said, getting out her card key, "good night."

She had just inserted the key into the slot, when Flash suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around, kissing her hard on the lips. Twilight widened her eyes, unsure of how to respond. When he pulled away, she blinked incredulously. In all the months they had dated, he had never kissed her so…aggressively before.

"What was that?" she said in alarm.

Releasing her, Flash backed away in embarrassment. "I'm…sorry, I…didn't mean to scare you, I just…"

Twilight cocked her head. "Are… *you* okay, Flash?"

He locked eyes with her for a moment and then sighed. "Why did you invite me here?"

She scrunched her muzzle. "What do you mean?"

"It's just that," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "I came here to support you, but…you've practically ignored me all night. I mean I know you came here to catch up with your old friends but…there's clearly something about your past that you're not telling me. Heck, I had to hear about the fact that your roommate did time for using dark magic from *Starlight Glimmer* ."

She took a step back. "She…told you about that?"

"Yeah, and…it kind of hurts that you don't have that kind of trust in me. I know we haven't been dating for a few months, but…" He closed his eyes. "What am I to you, Twilight?"

Twilight opened her mouth, but to her surprise, couldn't find the words. Flash hung his head.

"When you figure it out, give me a call."

He walked past her to his room. Twilight's mouth remained open, still speechless.

"This is all the footage ya've got?" Mistress Mare-velous asked the security guard at the Canterlot Museum of Magic.

"Yeah," Officer Lens said, indicating the security monitors. "I'm telling you, we've gone through this footage of the night of robbery hundreds of times, but the thief doesn't appear anywhere on these cameras! See?"

He pressed some keys, making one of the monitors rewind. The picture showed the Gauntlets of Thor inside a glass case.

"Gauntlets," he said.

A second later, the metal gloves vanished into thin air.

"No gauntlets."

Fili-Second turned her head upside-down. "Have you played the video really, really, *really* slow? Maybe the thief has super-speed! Or

the power of invisibility!"

"Or is just real smart," Mare-velous said. "Can we have a copy of this?"

"Sure," Lens said, typing some commands into the keyboard. "But I doubt you're going to find anything else."

"Maybe not." Mare-velous squinted at the screen with the empty glass case. "But our really insightful partner just might."

Okay, Trixie's pretty much become my walking random supervillain reference of the week.

Can't believe I started this whole series a year ago.

Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 2

" *You might win some, you might lose some. But you go in, you challenge yourself, and you become a better man, a better individual, a better fighter."*

- Conor McGregor

A week later, the Maretropolis Policeponies' Ball was in full swing at City Hall. Chief Spitfire stood at the podium onstage as she addressed the crowd of dressed-up policeponies.

"Thank you every pony for taking time out of your busy schedules for this event," she said into the microphone. "Tonight, we honor the ponies who help keep our city safe. And that's not just limited to our esteemed police force, but seven heroes who use their gifts to defend our fair city. Please welcome our special guests: the Power Ponies!"

The crowd applauded as the heroes came from all directions. Fili-Second whizzed through the room in a pink streak, reaching the stage first. Zapp swooped down from above, leaving a trail of lightning behind her. Mare-velous swung from the rafters, releasing her rope as she landed onstage. Radiance flew in on a glowing pink carpet, while Saddle Rager shyly came out from behind the curtain. The five ponies stood in a line as the audience continued to clap.

After about a minute, Spitfire wore a frown as she glanced around the room. The crowd did the same, expecting something else. Or rather, some *pony* else.

"I know you told me it was past Humdrum's bedtime," Spitfire whispered to the heroes, covering the microphone with her hoof, "but where's the Matter-Horn?"

The Power Ponies looked at each other, appearing just as confused. Fili-Second pointed to each of her colleagues, plus herself, counting

silently.

"I thought she said she was coming," Zapp whispered to Mare-velous.

Mare-velous scanned the crowd, murmuring, "Twilight Sparkle didn't show up either."

Her gaze fell upon Flash Sentry, whose eyes were also searching the room.

"She's not answering her commlink," Radiance whispered, her hoof in her ear.

Spitfire cleared her throat, casting a sideways glance at the expectant audience.

"Uh…" Mare-velous quickly grabbed the mic. "Unfortunately, the Masked Matter-Horn is out on patrol tonight." She chuckled nervously. "After all, *some pony's* gotta be watchin' the city while we're all partyin', am I right?"

The audience murmured and nodded to each other in collective agreement. The Power Ponies sighed in relief.

"Where is she *really* ?" Zapp whispered to Mare-velous harshly.

Mare-velous narrowed her eyes. "My guess: the same place she's been all week."

Back at Headquarters, Twilight was staring hard at the monitors, which showed the security footage from the Canterlot Museum of Magic. She used her magic to click on the mouse and move from window to window.

"I know I'm missing something," she murmured to herself. "I just don't know what."

"Twilight?"

Shrieking in surprise, Twilight fell backward with the rolling chair. Spike's face peered over her.

"Spike?" she said as he helped her up. She then noticed he was wearing his fuzzy purple pajamas with dragon-faced feet. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

He crossed his arms. "Shouldn't *you* be at the Policeponies' Ball?"

Twilight stared at him in silence, and then sighed. "I wasn't in the mood."

He watched as she lifted the chair up and sat back down. "This wouldn't have to do with the fact that your ex-boyfriend is at that ball, would it?"

"No!" Twilight said a little too loudly. "I just…some pony had to watch the tower tonight and I volunteered. After all, who knows when Discord might pop up and try to steal his Amulet back?"

"Uh-huh," Spike said in disbelief as he gazed up at the giant screen. "Is that the footage from that gauntlet robbery?"

"Mmm-hmm," Twilight said, enlarging one of the windows.

"You're *still* looking at that?"

"It's puzzling." She rewound the footage and played it back for the millionth time that night. "I mean there's no indication of the thief anywhere! No shadow, no strand of hair, nothing! And the perpetrator couldn't have been invisible. We would've still seen the Gauntlets of Thor floating away! Or at least the glass case lifting all by itself!"

"Maybe they used magic to teleport it out of the case?" Spike asked.

"Without triggering the alarm? Impossible!" She switched to the video showing the empty glass case. "The podium has a weight sensor. If the Gauntlets were removed from it, even for a second, the alarm would've gone off!"

"Maybe they disabled the alarm?"

"But *how* ?! Those alarms are *magical* ! One cannot simply… *disable* them! You'd need to be very well-versed in magic to be able to do that!"

"But…wasn't Discord able to do that with *your* security spells?"

Twilight hung her head. "Discord's a *god* , Spike! Unless he or some other divine entity stole the Gauntlets, there was no way any pony could've done all this undetected!"

Spike tapped his chin. "Maybe it *was* a god. You think maybe Thor wanted his Gauntlets back?"

She shook her head. "You remember when Discord showed up, right? I don't think Thor would've been so subtle. I mean…he's *Thor* . He could just demand that his Gauntlets be returned, the same way Discord demanded his Amulet. He'd have no reason for being so sneaky."

"How would you know? You've never met Thor."

She threw up her hooves. "I don't even know if he exists!"

"We know the Gods of Grace exist though, right? Why not the Gods of Norwhinny?"

Letting out a groan, Twilight placed her head in her hooves. "Just go to bed, Spike."

He sighed. "Fine. But you should really consider taking a break from all of this. All week, you've done nothing but stare at this footage. You've missed five days at the office, two charity auctions, three public appearances, and now one ball. The only time you *do* break away from these monitors is when there's trouble."

She did not respond, nor did she turn around to look at him.

"Look, I'm no psychiatrist, Twilight, but I have a feeling you're putting in these extra hours as the Masked Matter-Horn because you're… *avoiding* something. Or some *pony* , maybe? Thing is I can't figure out if the pony you're avoiding is Flash or Sun—"

This time, she did turn around. And she was glaring at him hard.

"Okay, okay!" Spike said, backing away with his hands up. "I'll go to bed!"

He walked over to the elevator. As the doors closed, Twilight turned back to the screen. She replayed the part where the Gauntlets of Thor vanished. After the fifth repeat, she let out a sigh.

"Maybe Spike's right," she said, releasing her magical hold on the mouse. "Maybe I am just doing this to avoid…"

She paused, unsure of how that sentence finished. "Besides, there is no possible way to solve this. Whoever this thief is, they had pragmatically planned, and practically perpetrated, the perfect crime."

She flopped her face onto the keyboard and mumbled, "They've won."

Suddenly, Sunset's voice echoed in her head, " *Why you giving up so soon, Sparkle?* "

Then Twilight recalled a moment when she and Sunset were fourteen. They had been in the schoolyard, playing a game of chess. Young Twilight had used her magic to turn over her white king in surrender.

"You've won," she had said.

Examining the board, Sunset had said, "Come on, you've got at least three moves before that happens."

"But you've got me cornered. Every move will put me in check. There's no possible way I can win."

"That doesn't mean you should just *give up.* If you give up now, then you'll never know if you were able to beat me or not. Besides," she had said with a smirk, "what fun would it be for me if I only won by forfeit?"

Smiling softly, Twilight had repositioned her king and continued the

game. Three moves later, Sunset had called checkmate.

"See?" Twilight had said. "I *couldn't* win."

"Yes," Sunset had said with a wink. "But you wouldn't have known that if you hadn't kept playing. Don't you feel better now, knowing you got through the whole game without giving up?"

Back in the present, Twilight lifted her head from the keyboard, her face imprinted with a tessellation of squares.

"You're right, Sunset," Twilight said, playing back the footage. "Don't give up on the game until it's over."

Just then, the General Badness Alarm went off, making Twilight groan in annoyance.

"Well, I could use a break anyway."

Spike came out of the elevator. "What's happened? What's going on?"

Twilight opened the Crime Tracker on the computer. She squinted at the red blinking dot on the city map.

"Typical," she said with a sigh. She picked up the commlink on the desk and put it back in her ear. "Girls, break-in at the Maretropolis Museum. Fili-Second, I'm going to need you to scout ahead, keep the perpetrator busy until I get there."

" *On it!* " Fili-Second piped.

" *Need us to come too?* " Zapp asked.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Twilight said. "The rest of you just enjoy the party."

" *Speaking of which,* " Radiance said, " *why aren't you...?* "

"Later, okay?" Twilight said, standing up.

"I'll come too!" Spike exclaimed, running to her side.

"No, Spike. I need you to stay here and guard the tower. If there's any more trouble, call the rest of the team."

Spike groaned. "Why am I always put on monitor duty?" He caught Twilight's glare. "I mean…right away, boss!"

He jumped onto the rolling chair while Twilight powered her horn.

Terra, pennae, cornibus…

The minute the Masked Matter-Horn crashed through the glass roof of the Maretropolis Museum, she knew something was wrong with this picture. No alarms were blaring. *The thief must've disabled them* , she thought.

But if that were the case, why hadn't the thief disabled the alarms *before* setting them off?

The Matter-Horn's ear twitched upon hearing a muffled cry from the next room. Powering her horn for good measure, she turned the corner and stepped over the red velvet rope to the new, unveiled Anugypt exhibit. There, leaning against an ancient column of hieroglyphs, were two security guards, a mare and a stallion, bound and gagged. The Matter-Horn quickly used her magic to free them.

"Don't worry, you're safe now," she said. "What happened?"

"We don't know," the mare said. "One minute, we're patrolling the halls, the next minute, the alarms are blaring."

"Only for half a minute though," said the stallion. "Then they suddenly stopped!"

"We came here to investigate, but then we were roped and gagged by magic!"

"Did you see the culprit?" the Mater-Horn asked.

They both shook their heads.

"But we know what they took," the mare said, pointing across the room. "The cuffs of Queen Neightocris."

The Matter-Horn turned to the empty glass case she was indicating. Upon further inspection, the alicorn realized it wasn't completely empty.

"Did the cuffs contain two black opals and four round pieces of lapis lazuli?" the Matter-Horn asked.

"Yes," the stallion said. "Why?"

"The cuffs are gone, but the jewels are still here. And I have a funny feeling they didn't simply fall out." She tapped her chin. "Why would the thief take the cuffs but deliberately leave the jewels?"

"Quite the riddle, isn't it?"

Jumping at the sudden voice, the Matter-Horn spun around to find the source. The guards looked around too, but there was no pony there.

"HELP!" said another voice.

This one, the hero recognized.

"Fili-Second?" She turned to the guards. "Get the police! And keep on guard! The thief is still here!"

She took flight and soared through the halls, listening for Fili-Second's high-pitched voice.

"Once I get outta these ropes, tall, dark and creepy shadow; you're in for a real flank-whooping!"

She followed the voice to the Norwhinnean exhibit. Fili-Second lay in the middle of the room, her hooves tied up.

"Mattie!" Fili-Second cried. "About time you showed up! I came over for backup like you told me to, but then the alarms just suddenly stopped and it got real spooky and I thought I could hear something but I couldn't find the thief anywhere but before I knew it I was tied

up!"

"Hang on," the Matter-Horn said, landing next to her. "How could you have been tied up? You're the fastest thing alive."

"I'm telling you! It's another super speedster like me, only evil!"

"I don't think they've left yet. Let's get you out of here."

She prepared her horn to release her colleague, when her horn was suddenly encased in flames. Shrieking, the Matter-Horn quickly doused the fire with a water spell.

"Ah, ah, ah," said the same disembodied voice from earlier. It was at such a neutral pitch that the heroes couldn't decide if it was male or female. "Sorry, sweetie, but I'd like to keep the game one-on-one. Evens the odds, you know."

Flapping her wings, the alicorn looked around. "Show yourself."

A low chuckle was heard. "Now, now, you can't expect me to make it *that* easy for you."

"The voice seems to be coming from everywhere," the Matter-Horn muttered to herself. "Ventriloquism?"

"I love puppets!" Fili-Second exclaimed.

"Close," the voice said.

"Of course," the Matter-Horn said, glancing at her bound-up friend. "You obviously know magic, so you must be casting a ventriloquist spell."

"Correct. Good luck trying to find me."

"So if you're casting a spell," the alicorn murmured, "your magic must be emitting some kind of aura," she rested her eyes on a display case of shields in the corner, "which means," she used her magic to slide the case aside, "it makes a very distinct sound!"

Sure enough, a unicorn-shaped figure had been hiding behind the

display case, its horn emitting green magic which also surrounded its throat. The thief doused their magic and sprinted along the wall.

"Oh, no you don't!" the Matter-Horn cried, charging her horn. "Freeze ray!"

But as she shot her ice beam, a fiery dome surrounded the thief, evaporating the ice into steam. The Matter-Horn gasped.

"A fire shield?"

"You might want to call out your attacks *after* you fire them!" the thief shouted over her shoulder.

Without the voice-altering spell, she sounded distinctly female now. She skidded to a halt so fast the Matter-Horn almost flew into her.

"For example," the thief said.

In a split second, the Matter-Horn was hit with a magical beam that set her wings on fire.

"Flamethrower!" the thief exclaimed, running as the hero wailed in agony.

Quickly spraying water from her horn, the Matter-Horn extinguished herself. When she looked up, she saw the thief climbing up the wall, her hooves glowing with green magic.

"Is that," the Matter-Horn said in disbelief, "an adhesive spell?"

"Pretty cool, huh?" the thief said as she neared the glass roof the Matter-Horn had broken earlier. "Comes in handy. Or should I say," she giggled, waving her glowing front hoof, " *hoof*- y?"

Growling in annoyance, the Matter-Horn zoomed upwards. To her surprise, the thief didn't hasten her climb, only waited. Then she leaped off the wall and onto the Matter-Horn's back. Pushing her legs upwards, the thief sprang towards the hole in the roof.

"Thanks for the lift!" she called cheerfully.

The Matter-Horn gaped as the thief shot through the hole, did a barrel roll and landed on the glass roof like a cat. Shaking it off, the hero flew up after her. The thief was laughing as she was reaching the edge of the roof.

"Honestly," she said, "this was an easier job than Thor's Gauntlets!"

She looked like she was about ready to jump to the next building.

That's it, the Matter-Horn thought. *No more Miss Nice Mare.*

Her horn glowed red. Throwing her head back, she shot a thick laser beam at the thief, striking her back hoof. Crying out, the thief lost her balance and landed flat on her face. She rolled over, but the Masked Matter-Horn was quicker. Pressing down on the thief's shoulders, the alicorn pinned her to the ground.

In the light of the moon, the hero was finally able to get a good look at the thief, who was wincing in pain. Her tight-fitting suit was a dark maroon, which covered her whole body, save her eyes and mouth. The golden cuffs of Queen Neightocris were on her front ankles, devoid of jewels. Her eyes opened, revealing them to be a deep sea green.

The thief glanced down at her damaged hoof. It was so badly burnt, it was smoking.

"End of the line," the Matter-Horn said, crouching over her foe. "Next time you want jewelry, go to Bray's."

The thief locked eyes with her and then smirked. "What keeps coming back even after it bursts into flames?"

The non sequitur caused the hero to blink back in befuddlement. "What?"

The scoundrel only widened her grin as her horn glowed orange. The Matter-Horn prepared her own horn to fight when the biggest surprise of all came.

The thief burst into flames.

Jumping backward, the Matter-Horn watched in alarm as the flames died down and the thief was nowhere to be seen. Horrified, the hero looked around. Had the thief burned herself to death? Impossible, for there would've at least been ash marks in her place.

Just then, the Matter-Horn heard a whoosh behind her. Turning around, she saw a gulf of flames extinguishing on the roof of the next building, the thief appearing in its place. Too stunned to respond, the hero's jaw dropped. The thief only cackled.

"Haven't guessed yet?"

She sprinted off, and the Matter-Horn was about to pursue her, when she teleported, this time without flames. Furious, the alicorn soared upwards and examined the rooftops from a bird's-eye view. But the thief had vanished without a trace.

"MY PRECIOUS MUSEUM!" Mr. Fetlock cried once the police showed up. "RUINED!"

"Don't worry, Mr. Fetlock," the Masked Matter-Horn said assuredly. "We'll be sure the cuffs are returned as soon as possible."

"I'm not talking about the cuffs!" He pointed up to the glass ceiling. "I'm talking about that hole you made in my roof!"

"Oh." The alicorn blushed. "Well, I was trying to catch the thief."

"I don't care! Every time you Power Ponies come in here, something either gets stolen or damaged!" He poked her in the chest. "And how come *you* are never sent to jail for it?!"

Chief Spitfire, who was still in her dinner jacket, placed her hoof between the Matter-Horn and the curator. "Mr. Fetlock, we'd like to ask you a few questions concerning the stolen artifacts."

As the chief led him away, he sent the Matter-Horn a death glare, which sent a chill up the hero's spine.

"Sheesh," Fili-Second said, zipping to her side. "What's his

problem?"

"Find anything?" the Matter-Horn asked.

Fili-Second shook her head. "Searched the whole place top to bottom to left to right. No clues anywhere."

"Excuse me, Miss Matter-Horn?"

The alicorn winced at the familiar voice. *Not now,* she thought.

"Can I have your autograph?" Flash Sentry asked, holding up his notepad. "I'm a big fan of yours."

The Matter-Horn put on a big smile before facing him. "Of course."

She used her magic to grab his pen.

"I'm sure you'll catch the thief," Flash said, staring at her in awe. "You always manage to catch them in the end."

She said nothing as she signed the notepad and handed him back his pen.

"Flash, go interview those security guards, would you?" Spitfire said, pushing him aside. "Sorry about that, Matter-Horn. Officer Sentry is a bit…unprofessional."

"No problem," the Matter-Horn said softly, watching Flash's back as he left.

"Now, are you certain you've told us everything?"

"Yes. The thief was a unicorn, and she was pretty advanced in magic."

"Really?" Fili-Second asked. "You mean not all unicorns can be all ventriloquist-y or fire shield-y?"

"As if those spells weren't hard enough, she managed to cast the *Phoenix* Charm!"

"What's the Phoenix Charm?" Spitfire asked.

The Matter-Horn shook her head. "It's an extremely complex, extremely dangerous, and extremely forbidden spell. The theory is that one can rejuvenate oneself using flames in the same way an aging phoenix bursts into flames and then is reborn from the ashes. That thief's hoof was badly burnt, but after disappearing into flames and then reappearing several feet away, her hoof looked as good as new, and she was able to run again!"

"Phoenix, huh?" Spitfire said, making a note in her book. "And you are certain this was the same thief who stole Thor's Gauntlets in Canterlot?"

The alicorn nodded. "She admitted it, and somehow I think she deliberately captured Fili-Second while in the Norwhinnean exhibit to leave us a hint. But the thief that stole the Gauntlets didn't leave a clue behind, didn't trigger any alarms. If she's the same thief, why would she be so careless this time?"

The chief shrugged. "Thieves can make mistakes."

"Not this one," the Matter-Horn muttered, rubbing her chin. "Somehow, I have a feeling she's incapable of making mistakes."

The next morning, the newspapers and channels were all abuzz about Maretropolis' latest criminal. Apparently, some pony had been watching the rooftop battle between the thief and the Matter-Horn from their apartment window and filmed it with their phone, capturing the thief's fiery escape. As consequence, the tabloids were calling her "The Phoenix."

All Power Ponies were gathered in the tower. Twilight paced in front of the monitors as she voiced her thoughts.

"It just doesn't make any sense," she said in a murmur. "Doesn't make any sense."

Seeing as how their unofficial leader was preoccupied, Applejack decided to take the reins of this briefing. Standing up from the couch, she said, "Okay, what do we know about this thief so far?"

"She's real tricky," Rainbow Dash said, sipping a soda can.

"And has no sense of fashion," Rarity said. "In what universe is maroon a suitable camouflage?"

"And she seems to like really old things," Pinkie said, hanging upside down on the couch while using a rubber band to make a cat's cradle.

Fluttershy suddenly burst into laughter. Everyone turned to see that she was talking on her cell.

"Oh, you are just *awful* !" She giggled. " *Please* , you're making me blush!"

Twilight cleared her throat. Fluttershy turned to see the others glaring at her.

"Sorry, I have to go," she said into the phone. After a second, she smiled. "No, *you* hang up." She laughed. "No, *you* hang up! No, *you* hang—"

Rainbow snatched her phone and flipped it closed.

"Whoever were you talking to?" Rarity asked.

Fluttershy's cheeks turned pink. "No pony."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "I'll bet it was that Delancey fella."

"Who's Delancey?" Spike asked.

"Just this colt Fluttershy's been seein'."

Rarity gasped loudly. "You have a *gentlecolt* friend?!"

"No!" Fluttershy blushed deeper. "Well, I mean…we never really talked about it but…" She gave a small smile. "I mean we've been seeing each other a lot and…I like him, and he makes me laugh and…"

Rarity sat down beside her. "Details, please!"

"Ahem!" Twilight exclaimed. "Have you forgotten we have more pressing matters to deal with?"

"Right," Rarity said, straightening up. "This Phoenix character, she seems to be adept at magic."

" *Complicated* magic," Twilight said. "I've never seen any pony cast a Phoenix Charm to perfection."

"Just how complicated is it?" Spike asked.

"It's next to *impossible* ! One cannot set oneself aflame without burning oneself to a crisp! To use such a method to heal oneself would be improbable!"

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "How do ya know about this charm?"

Twilight locked gaze with her. "Let's just say I've done my research." She turned to the monitors, which bore pictures of the items stolen. "This has got to be the most puzzling adversary I've ever faced." She looked towards the Gauntlets of Thor. "First, she pulls off the perfect crime," she said, turning to the Anugyptian cuffs, "but then at her second job, she triggers an alarm, lets herself be caught on camera, and doesn't leave the crime scene immediately! Why would she make so many mistakes when she had already proven she could pull something off like this so flawlessly?"

"You'd think she *wanted* to be caught," Pinkie said, getting her hooves tangled in the rubber band.

Twilight's face lit up. "Pinkie, you're a genius!"

Pinkie grinned as she attempted to wrench her hooves free. "Tell me something I *don't* know."

"Of course. That explains it!" Twilight threw her hooves in the air. "She set the alarm off on *purpose* , and then switched it off before I arrived!"

"Long enough to alert the tower," Applejack said, glancing at the General Badness Alarm.

"But not long enough to alert the police," Rarity said, "because they were all at the ball."

"Then the Phoenix must've *counted* on us showing up," Rainbow said, "because she was ready for Fili!"

"Think she used some kind of spell to trap me?" said Pinkie, who was now in a pretzel position with her rubber band.

"It's possible," Twilight said. "Aside from a super-speed spell, there is a time-altering spell that can make everything around you move in slow motion. But both those spells are almost as advanced as the Phoenix Charm!"

"So the thief was waiting…for *us* ?" Fluttershy asked with a shiver.

Twilight rubbed her chin. "It would seem that way. There's something strange about the items she stole too. Thor's Gauntlets, though powerful, are completely useless without Thor's Hammer, which, of course, has never been found. And the monetary value of Neightocris' cuffs decreases immensely without the jewels, yet she deliberately left them behind."

She turned back to the screen in thought. "It's like…the thief isn't after power *or* money. So what *is* she after?"

Rainbow checked her watch. "Well, I better get back to the museum. We've got a mummy coming in today and I'm supposed to help Mr. Fetlock with that." She rolled her eyes as she stood. "He's especially cranky after last night."

"I'd better return to work too," Rarity said.

"Me too," Fluttershy said.

"Pinkie and I have a few places to see for our bakery," Applejack said. "But call us if ya need anythin'."

As their colleagues filed out of the room, Spike let out a yawn.

"Maybe we should catch some z's. We were up all night watching and re-watching the museum footage."

Twilight didn't take her eyes off the screen. "You get some rest. Some pony's gotta watch the tower."

With a shrug, Spike headed for the elevator. Twilight clicked on the window showing the footage of the Phoenix bursting into flames. She asked herself the same question she'd been asking for the past week.

How is she able to accomplish the impossible?

Her colleagues couldn't give her the answer. They didn't understand this sort of magic. But she knew someone who did.

Her eyes moved in the direction of her purse. Using her magic, she unclasped it and withdrew Sunset Shimmer's business card.

In case you didn't know this, I was working on a play for a contest, and it's almost finished so I decided to get back to this. Sorry this isn't much, but I felt it was the best place to stop for now, and to give you something after such a long wait.

Was going for a bit of a Catwoman/Riddler kind of villain here.

Queen Neightocris=Nitocris, and Egyptian Queen (best pun I could make)

Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 3

WARNING: SEXUAL CONTENT AHEAD!

" *I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it."*

- Mae West

Twilight was in her study when a knock came at her door.

"Come in," she said, looking up from the book on Ancient Anugypt she'd been reading.

"Um, Twilight?" Spike said, opening the door a crack. "There's, uh, some pony here to see you."

Taking a deep breath, Twilight stood up from her seat and straightened her purple pantsuit. "Let her in, Spike."

Nervously, he opened the door further and in stepped an all too familiar mare dressed in a white pantsuit.

"Very fancy place you've got here," Sunset Shimmer said, looking around. "I always said you'd be living in a penthouse one day."

"Leave us, Spike," Twilight said.

"A-Are you sure?" the dragon stammered.

She nodded. "There are some sapphires in the kitchen for you."

He didn't squeal in delight as he slowly shut the door on them.

"By the tone of your voice," Sunset said, her joyful expression turning serious, "I'm guessing this isn't a friendly social call."

"Sadly, no," Twilight said. "I need your magical consultation on a… project."

Sunset smirked. "For Sparkle Labs, I presume."

"Yes," Twilight said quickly. "But it is *very* top secret, and any information I divulge here cannot leave this room."

Using her hoof, Sunset made a zipping motion across her lips. After a quick glance around, Twilight placed her hoof on her old friend's shoulder and brought her close.

"Did you bring the book I asked you for?"

With a nod, Sunset gestured to her red saddlebag. "The feds confiscated my books upon my arrest, but luckily they didn't find the one I'd hidden under the floorboards of our dorm room, locked in a safe which could only be opened by my magic."

Twilight glanced down at the bag. "How did you get it back?"

She shrugged. "Called in a favor from one of our old professors."

Her eyes lingered on the bag before Twilight shook her head. "We should be talking someplace more private."

Sunset appeared confused, which was rare for her. "What's more private than here?"

After glancing around once more, Twilight tilted her head towards the bookcase and walked over to it. Sunset watched in bewilderment as Twilight took down a picture of her and Spike, used her magic to make a security panel appear and then went through all her peculiar security scans.

Sunset came up to the bookcase just in time to see Twilight pull out a book titled *Don't Cry After Sunset.*

"I'm flattered," Sunset said bluntly as the bookcase opened up. "Though I must say, the saliva scan was kind of overkill."

"Few ponies know this room exists," Twilight said, taking Sunset's

hoof to lead her in. "Spike knows about it, but I've never brought him inside."

As the bookcase closed behind them, Sunset's eyes widened as she took in the sight of Twilight's private study.

"This is…this is…" Sunset stammered. "Incredible!" She rushed to the cauldron in the middle of the room. "Our old cauldron!" She ran to the bookshelves. "Our crystal ball! That dragon's claw we, err, *borrowed* from our old biology lab!"

Reaching her hoof up, she ran it along the spines of the books. " *Necromancy, Raising the Dead for Dummies* , you kept them all! Wait. Does that mean…? Yes!"

Her horn glowed green and levitated a book from the shelf. " *Forbidden Spells: A Reference Guide* !"

She opened the book to the title page with the message from S.S. written upon it. She looked up at Twilight as tears started forming in her eyes.

"You really *haven't* forgotten, have you?"

Twilight gave a small smile as she used her magic to close the book and put it back on the shelf. "As much as I'd like to reminisce about the past, we must discuss…"

"Is that what I think it is?"

Turning around, Twilight saw that Sunset's attention was on a necklace kept inside a glass dome on the shelf. The necklace was shaped like a dark gray alicorn, with a red jewel in the middle.

"The Alicorn Amulet," Sunset said in awe, reaching up to touch the glass. "Wherever did you get this?"

"The Masked Matter-Horn," Twilight said quickly, gently lowering Sunset's hoof with her own. "After she got it back from the Great and Powerful Trixie, she insisted that it be kept somewhere safe, and you know how Sparkle Labs is famed for its tight security."

"I certainly do," Sunset said with a smirk. "You know it's funny. I really thought you would've left all this dark magic business behind, after my arrest."

"Believe me, I tried," Twilight said, gazing at the shelves of spell books. "But…the information can be useful for good instead of evil."

"That's what I told the police! But they didn't believe me!"

"Anyway," Twilight said, taking a deep breath, "I know you're trying to turn over a new leaf, and this might get you in trouble with your parole officer, but I needed to ask you about a spell we came across in our junior year that you were very interested in and…"

"Which one?" Sunset asked without hesitance.

A little surprised at her eagerness, Twilight replied, "The Phoenix Charm."

Grinning, Sunset levitated an old thick book out of her bag and placed it on a lectern in the corner of the room.

"I was hoping you'd ask." Using her magic, she flipped through the pages. "I saw that viral video of the museum thief last night, and recognized the spell instantly. Did you see it? To think, some pony with magic strong enough to perfect the Phoenix Charm!" Her eyes became dreamy. "Oh, if I had been there to see it in person!"

"Yes, well," Twilight said, clearing her throat, "this thief concerns me. The items she stole are invaluable in terms of power, and they cannot be sold as they are too recognizable. Not to mention she deliberately removed the jewels from those cuffs."

"So if she's not after power or money, what do you figure she's after?"

Twilight shrugged. "The thrill of the steal, I suppose. So far she's outwitted highly advanced security measures without leaving so much as a clue. And since Sparkle Labs has one of the most top notch security systems in Maretropolis…"

"You figure she's going to strike there next."

Twilight nodded. "We have to figure out everything we can about this thief, be ready if she *does* show up."

"Ooh, I love a good mystery!" Sunset turned to her friend. "It'll be like when we took down that egg-smuggling ring!"

With a snort, Twilight said, "Only this time, we won't get a dragon out of it."

"Who knows? When we're through, we could get an *actual* phoenix for a pet!"

They both chuckled as Sunset stopped at a bookmarked page.

"Here it is," she said, placing her hoof on the page. "The Phoenix Charm." She shook her head. "Remember when we were teens, and this spell baffled us so much?"

Twilight snickered. "Your mental gears were turning so much, steam was coming out of your ears!"

"Hey, don't forget that night you stayed up reading this page over and over, running on ten cups of coffee!" Sunset scoffed. " *Gosh* you were crazy when you were obsessed with something!"

"Err, yeah," Twilight said with a blush. "But we're older and smarter now, so maybe, if we put our heads together, we can figure out how the Phoenix managed to pull this off." She rubbed her foreleg awkwardly. "That is, if you're up for the challenge."

"You kidding?" Sunset said, placing her hoof on her hip. "Since when have you known me to turn down a challenge?" She winked at her friend. "It'll be like old times."

"Yeah," Twilight said, running her hoof along the open page. "Like old times."

The bowl of sapphires was sitting there on the kitchen counter, but Spike didn't feel hungry. The idea of Sunset Shimmer, the mare he'd been warned about all his life, being in his home was making him

nauseated. Although it was good that Twilight was trying to make amends with her old friend, he couldn't help but worry about his guardian associating with a formerly incarcerated dark wizard

He almost decided on eating a sapphire when his cellphone rang. When he read the caller ID, he cocked his eyebrow in bewilderment.

Picking up the phone, he said, "Hey Applejack. Something wrong?"

" *Wrong?* " Applejack said on the other line. " *Nothing's wrong. I thought I'd just…say hello to a colleague.* "

This confused him even more. All the Power Ponies' had exchanged numbers in case their commlinks ever went offline, but he didn't expect any of them to call on a personal matter, much less Mistress Mare-velous. He didn't take her for the sociable type.

He heard a sigh on the other end. " *Actually, something* is *wrong. Not hero-wise. Actually, it has to do with our case, but…* " She sighed again. " *You've known Twilight much longer than any of us. Has she always been…secretive?* "

Even though she couldn't see him, Spike shrugged. "Pretty much. I mean I probably know more of her secrets than anybody, but when she's facing personal stuff or something, she kind of…shuts down, closes every pony off, even me."

" *I've noticed,* " Applejack said in a blunt tone. " *I mean you know I know about her, uh, 'dark interests,' and I get why she can't really talk about that so openly, but…what's the deal with her and that Sunset Shimmer?* "

Spike blinked a few times. "Oh. Right. You saw her at the reunion."

" *I've tried askin' her about it, but every time I do, she quickly changes the subject.* "

"Yup," he said, grabbing a sapphire from the bowl. "That's Twilight for you."

" *I understand if it's too painful for her to talk about, but we're her teammates, Spike. She's always talkin' about how we should work*

as a team and trust each other. We already trust each other with our secret identities, why can't she trust us about her personal life? "

With a sigh, Spike bit into his gem. "She doesn't want ponies to think she's vulnerable." After chewing a little, he swallowed. "After all, she's supposed to be the most powerful pony in Maretropolis, both as the queen of the business world and the heroic guardian of justice. She thinks if she shows the slightest bit of weakness, no pony will take her seriously."

" *Guess I can understand that. Ever since my parents…well, ya know, I…* "

"Put up a wall?" Spike said, placing the gem on the counter.

There was a pause. " *It's that obvious, huh?* "

"Maybe a little."

That got him a chuckle. " *But she shouldn't have to feel that way with us.* "

"Us more than anyone, because we know that she is more than just one mighty mare. She's two."

" *She should at least talk to* me *. I mean I feel she should. After all, she showed me her secret cave of darkness.* "

Spike giggled.

" *Which is why I know she and this Sunset Shimmer were very close. She said she made a mistake that cost her a friend, and one of them books has the initials 'S.S.' in it.* "

"Well, for starters, you should know I've never met Sunset Shimmer until today. At least, she's met me but I don't remember. From what Twilight told me, not only did they go to Celestia's school together, but they were roommates at Canterlot University. They were both studious, except Sunset was a bit more outgoing, always trying to coax Twilight out of her shell.

"In fact, they were walking back from a late night party when they

came across a gang smuggling dragon eggs."

" *Dragon eggs?* " Applejack said, sounding intrigued.

"Yup," Spike said, proudly pointing to himself. "Guess who was in one of the eggs?"

" *So…you never knew your real parents?* "

"Nope," he said, as if the fact didn't bother him. "I mostly stayed at Mr. and Mrs. Sparkle's house while Twilight was at college, but she and Sunset would come by often. Twilight says Sunset was like a second mother to me. Which might explain why she was so excited to see me when she came in."

" *Came in? You mean Sunset's over there now?* "

"Yeah. Twilight said she needed to talk to her about something."

" *Where are they now?* "

"I left them in the study."

" *Her study, study, or her* private *study?* "

"Well, uh…the study, study, I think."

There was another pause. " *Spike, exactly* how *close were Twilight and Sunset?* "

He leaned back on the counter. "Twilight says Sunset was more than just her friend. They were practically inseparable. They ate lunch together, walked to class together, did their homework together; even if they were in separate classes."

" *And…they worked on dark magic together.* "

Biting his lip, Spike replied with a hesitant, "Y-Yes."

" *And…Sunset was sent to jail for it, but Twilight wasn't.* "

The dragon scratched his spines absentmindedly. "Err…y-yeah I… guess that's what…"

" *Ya really think it's smart to leave them alone together, Spike?* "

Worry welled up in him. "You think Sunset's going to turn Twilight to the dark side?"

" *Dark magic aside, should two ponies* that *inseparable really be left* alone *?!* "

At a loss, he said, "What do you mean?"

There was a thump, which he assumed to be a face-hoof. " *I keep forgettin' you're only ten* ."

"But it's as you said," Twilight told Sunset. "The spell is brilliant in theory, but impossible in practice."

"Not necessarily," Sunset said, tapping her temple. "Sure, burning oneself to a crisp for the sake of healing oneself may not be the most logical move, but if it works for phoenixes, why not other beings?"

Rubbing her chin, Twilight said, "I remember you talking about combining the Phoenix Charm with a fireproofing spell."

"Yes, I considered it at one point. But the point of the spell is to burn your injured body so it can transform into a completely healed one. If you fireproof yourself, the flames won't heal you."

"Then I suppose the spell wouldn't work on dragons, huh?"

"Did you see the video of the thief performing the spell?"

Twilight gave an exhausted sigh. "Hundreds of times."

"Think, then," Sunset said, leaning on the lectern. "What did you notice about the spell, other than the flames?"

Taking a deep breath, she decided to go over the video step by step. "First, the thief's horn illuminated, then flames emitted from the tip of the horn, spread all over her body and went down to her

hooves."

Sunset smirked. "Played it in slow-mo, I see."

Twilight started pacing. "When the flames diminished, she had completely disappeared. A second later, there was a sudden burst of flames several feet away and…"

She stopped in her tracks. "Several feet away." Her head shot up. "Several feet away." She clapped her hooves in triumph. "Several feet away, oh my gosh, she teleported!"

"There it is," Sunset said, pointing at her.

"It makes sense!" Twilight exclaimed, walking back to Sunset. "When you teleport, you're already breaking your body apart until billions of atoms and sending them from one place to another, so to expose yourself to the phoenix-like flames at the same time…"

"…would induce the healing effect…"

"…without inflicting any physical pain…"

"…because when you're in a teleporting state…"

"…you're already broken up…"

"…and by the time you get from Point A to Point B…"

"…your body is fully restored!" they finished together.

A few seconds after they said this, Twilight realized that she was grasping Sunset firmly by the shoulders. Sunset glanced down at Twilight's hooves, a light blush coming to her cheeks. Also blushing, Twilight released her and took a step back.

"I've missed this," Sunset said softly.

Twilight placed her hooves on the open book and tried to turn her attention back to it. "Me too. With all that's going on at work, it's hard to find someone to talk to about these things." She hung her head. "It's…not as easy as it sounds, being who I am. I feel like I'm always

pretending for some pony."

She heard Sunset take a step closer. "You never have to pretend with me."

With a small smile, Twilight said, "Yeah. We were quite the team, weren't we? There hardly was a problem we couldn't solve."

Glancing down at the book, Sunset said, "That's not… *all* I've missed."

Twilight stiffened as she felt Sunset's hoof slither over hers. She watched as the golden hoof massaged her lavender one gently.

"Remember that night?" Sunset asked. "The night we finally perfected the Flight Spell?"

Twilight looked up to meet her gaze. Sunset's pupils were so dilated, the green irises of her eyes were nothing but two thin slivers.

"We were so excited, jumping up and down our dorm room," Sunset said, her hoof snaking up Twilight's foreleg. "Your wings, flapping wildly about."

Her hoof stopped at Twilight's shoulder, her other hoof settling on the other shoulder.

"You swung me around in your strong forelegs," Sunset whispered, moving closer to her, "and…in the heat of the moment…I did the unthinkable."

Twilight couldn't move. She even forgot how to breathe. All she could think about was how close Sunset was to her now. So close, her abdomen was moving against hers. It froze her more than any paralysis spell.

Just like their last night together.

"Do you ever think about that night?" Sunset asked, her hoof hooking around Twilight's neck.

Twilight finally opened her mouth. When she spoke, her voice was

devoid of breath.

"S-Sometimes."

Sunset leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "I do. Every night."

Snapping back to reality, Twilight took a step back. "Sunset, I… sorry, but…this really isn't the time. Nor place."

"Why not?" Sunset said, stepping forward. "We're alone. No one can disturb us. Not to mention…"

Not watching where she was going, Twilight backed into the cauldron and nearly toppled it over. After she had levitated it back into place, Sunset slammed her hooves on either side of Twilight, gripping the edge of the cauldron. Twilight trembled upon seeing the fires of desire within her fillyhood friend's eyes.

"…it's been ten years," Sunset whispered. "Memories of our first, and last, night together were all that kept me sane in that prison cell." She made contact with Twilight's hoof again and slid hers up her friend's foreleg. "That, and…"

Her lips came so fast, Twilight couldn't stop her. Her eyes wide open, Twilight stared at Sunset as she kissed her firmly, but tenderly.

They were just as warm as the billionaire remembered.

When Sunset pulled away, she kept her eyes closed as she whispered, "Let me help you forget about your troubles, Twilie." Her horn glowed as she moved her hoof to Twilight's chest. "In here, you don't have to pretend. When we're together," in one swift motion, her clothes fell to her hooves, "neither of us has to pretend."

As Twilight stared at Sunset's naked body, her memories of their one night together came flooding back. As she felt Sunset's hoof slide under the front of her blouse, and the other reach down to her flank, Twilight, for the moment, forget about everything else. The stress of running a multi-billion-bit company, the stress of leading an elite team of superheroes, the stress of tracking down a master thief, Flash. All of it seemed to fall away.

To think she had spent all this time worrying about seeing her old friend again, when her old friend was acting like nothing bad had passed between them. In fact, she was picking up where they had, quite literally, left off.

Sunset, the pony she'd confided in for so long. The only one who could match her intelligence. The friend who wouldn't fail her, even when Twilight had failed her.

Decidedly, Twilight closed her eyes and said, "I've missed you, Sunset."

Pulling her naked friend fully against her body, Twilight pressed her lips against hers. Laughing in her throat, Sunset pushed herself against Twilight, causing them both to fall into the cauldron.

"So…what you're suggesting is," Spike said, still talking to Applejack on the phone, "Twilight and Sunset may have been… *more* than just friends?"

Applejack appeared to hesitate on the other end. " *It's…possible.* "

"So," Spike said, scratching his temple, "they were like…sister soulmates or something?"

There was a groan. " *This is* really *a conversation you should be havin' with Twilight.* "

Twilight didn't know which was more exhilarating, the feel of the body rubbing against hers or the hot water lapping against her skin. She and Sunset were entangled in the cauldron, which the latter had filled with bubbling water, courtesy of her magic.

"Admit it," Sunset said, nuzzling her neck. "Admit that you've missed this."

Twilight gasped as Sunset grabbed her flank. "M-Maybe…a little?"

"See?" she said, running her tongue along Twilight's neck. "You don't need that stupid policecolt. He didn't appreciate you the way I do."

The mention of Flash snapped Twilight back to her senses. She looked down at the mare wrapped around her body. What was she doing?

"S-Sunset," Twilight stammered, attempting to push her away. "We really…we shouldn't be…I'm with Flash!"

Sunset scoffed. "Don't give me that." She tightened her grip on her. "The asshole dumped you after forcefully kissing you. Talk about needy!"

Twilight's eyes widened as she pushed hard against Sunset, placing her at foreleg's length. "How did you know he kissed me?"

Sunset blinked. "It was…in the news?"

The billionaire shook her head. "I never told any pony about that. Not even Spike."

Sunset's mouth opened, but no sound came out. She glanced around anxiously, as if trying to find an excuse. Twilight watched her with growing suspicion.

"C-Come on, Twilight," Sunset said, forcing a laugh. "You know how good I am at deducing these things! I even knew which sandwich you'd eat at the reunion!"

"But how could you have known about the kiss unless you were…?"

A sick feeling welled up in Twilight's stomach as she started to realize the dangerous situation she was in.

"Get out," she said firmly.

"Twilie?" Sunset said.

Narrowing her eyes, Twilight started climbing out of the cauldron. "Get out. Now."

"B-B-But," Sunset said, swimming to the cauldron's edge, "we were just having a moment!"

Growling in fury, Twilight used her magic to levitate the naked mare out of the cauldron and open the passage door. She then magically tossed Sunset's clothes and saddlebag into her hooves.

"Twilie, let's be reasonable…" Sunset started to say.

"Get out!" Twilight shouted. "Before I call my bodyguard!"

Not wanting to enrage her any further, Sunset ran out of the study. When she threw open the door, Spike was standing there. He opened his mouth as the naked mare ran past him, carrying a bundle of clothes. Now, it wasn't unusual for ponies to be running around naked, but seeing as Sunset had arrived with clothes on, the question of why she would take them off made Spike scratch his head.

He stepped into the study and saw that the passage door was open. As he peered inside, he found Twilight using her magic to angrily pull her clothes back on.

"Um…Twilight?" he asked.

She spun around, a deep red blush on her cheeks.

"What's going…?"

"Get out!" she snapped.

Holding up his hands, Spike backed away from the passageway and out of the study. Sighing heavily, Twilight stepped out of the passage, closed the door, and collapsed into an easy chair. She put a hoof to her aching head.

A knock came at the door, making her groan. When she gave no answer, the door opened and Bon-Bon peered in.

"Miss Sparkle?" the driver said.

"What is it?" Twilight mumbled, not turning to look at her.

The unicorn felt something drop into her lap. Opening her eyes, she saw a file bearing the word *CLASSIFIED* stamped in big red letters.

"It's not my department," Bon-Bon said, folding a hoof behind her back, "but I was able to pull a few strings."

Twilight took the file in her hooves. "Thank you, Bon-Bon. You can expect a bonus on your next paycheck."

"Thank you, ma'am," Bon-Bon said, bowing slightly before taking her leave.

"Say hello to Lyra for me," Twilight called just as the door was closed.

She opened the folder to find a personnel record for Canterlot Maximum Security Prison. The form contained four hoof prints, some physical details of the prisoner, and a mugshot. The name on the file was *Shimmer, Sunset.*

Turning the page, Twilight found a page from a yellow legal pad with some notes scribbled onto it. From a psychologist, Twilight assumed. Sunset's name was at the top of the page. Twilight read the words "easily distracted," "excellent memory," "possible superiority complex," "peculiar obsession with brain puzzles," and "has tendency to change the subject, especially concerning friend Twilight Sparkle."

As Twilight squinted at the page, a thumb drive fell out of the folder. She picked it up with her magic and saw Sunset Shimmer's name on the label.

"What happened to you, Sunset?" she murmured.

Hours later, Twilight was sitting at her desk with her laptop open in front of her. The thumb drive had contained hours of audio recordings of Sunset's sessions with the prison psychologist, Dr. Bliss.

" *Let's talk about your former roommate,* " said a mare's voice

belonging to the doctor, " *Twilight Sparkle* ."

There was a groan belonging to Sunset Shimmer. "Why *do you keep bringing her* up *?!* "

" *She was your best friend, wasn't she? And the mare you used forbidden magic on.* "

" *Yeah, I did it* ," Sunset said in a disgruntled tone. " *We've established that, haven't we?* "

" *You just seem angry every time we bring her up.* "

" *I'm* not *angry!* "

" *Alright. You're not angry. Still, you've been in here for a few years, and you've yet to receive a visit from her.* "

" *Did the miller's daughter* want *the annoying little dwarf to visit? Can't the straw remain straw?* "

There was a sigh from the doctor. " *Keep spouting riddles like this, and they might place you in a more…appropriate institution.* "

" *If you mean the nut house, be my guest. I hear the rooms are a lot cushier.* "

Twilight felt herself growing sicker as she continued listening to Sunset's ramblings. Another hour passed until she got to the very last recording.

" *I'm really impressed with your progress, Sunset* ," Dr. Bliss said. " *The warden claims you're a model prisoner.* "

" *What can I say?* " Sunset said in a calm voice. " *After ten years, this place has grown on me.* "

" *Are you nervous about your parole hearing?* "

" *Should I be?* "

" *Well, you're doing so well, you might be granted early release. Do*

you believe you're ready to re-enter society? "

" *Well, I'm definitely not the same pony I was ten years ago. I realize I've been going about this all wrong, and that I should take a different approach.* "

" *To life?* "

" *You could say that. You could even say that I've been…reborn.* "

There was a knock at the door and Twilight paused the recording. "Come in."

Spike opened the door a crack. "You, uh, still in a bad mood?"

Twilight shook her head and gestured for him to approach.

"A letter came in just now," he said, holding up an envelope. "No return address, but…"

Twilight looked at the envelope and her eyes widened. On it, written in fancy cursive were the words *The Masked Matter-Horn.* With a gulp, Twilight took the envelope with her magic, opened it and read the typewritten message inside. Spike watched as his guardian's face grew pale.

"W-What's it say?" Spike stammered.

Twilight lowered the letter, wearing a look of determination. "Leave the room, Spike, but wait at the door."

He knew better than to argue and obeyed her command. Once the door was closed, Twilight clicked on the webcam icon on her computer and waited for the video window to open. The moment she saw her face onscreen, she pressed the record button.

Ten minutes later, the study doors burst open, making Spike jump back from them. Twilight had summoned her wings and Matter-Horn attire. She used her magic to adjust her goggles as she stormed past the dragon.

"Twilight?" Spike said, running after her. "What's wrong?"

"Spike," the Matter-Horn said, turning to him. "I need you to listen very carefully." She levitated a thumb drive into view and placed it in his claw. "If I'm not back in an hour, gather up the team and show them the video on here."

He looked up at her worriedly. "What are you talking about? Where are you going?"

Using her magic to open a window, she replied, "To catch a crook," and flew out.

The Masked Matter-Horn paced back and forth on the roof of an old apartment building standing at a street corner. She levitated the letter in front of her face, reading its contents for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Maybe I was wrong," she muttered.

Deep inside, she *hoped* she was wrong. But the evidence was clear. There was no other explanation. She kept searching in her head for one, but none came.

But if she *was* wrong, then perhaps the thief wouldn't show up.

"Figured it out then, did you?" said an all too familiar voice.

The Matter-Horn shut her eyes in disappointment. She didn't need to turn around to see who it was.

"The phoenix," she said. "The phoenix is the creature that keeps coming back, that rises up from the ashes."

"And *who* , Matter-Horn," the voice said, taking a step closer behind her, " *is* the Phoenix?"

The hero took a deep breath and repeated the message that had brought her here. " *Come alone to the place where our names meet.* "

She opened her eyes, which were glassed over with oncoming tears. "On the corner of Twilight Avenue…"

She turned around, facing the Phoenix. "…and Sunset Boulevard."

The Phoenix grinned in triumph as she powered her horn. "Very good, Twilie."

The Matter-Horn didn't even bother to block or dodge her attack.

Not really much of a surprise, I realize. You can expect at least one more chapter of this arc.

I got the name Dr. Bliss from the "Hey, Arnold!" episode "Helga On the Couch."

Don't Cry After Sunset: Part 4

" *A strange game. The only winning move is not to play.* "

- *Joshua,* WarGames

In a cozy little teashop, Fluttershy and her new beau, Delancey, were sitting at a table, laughing.

"And then she said," Delancey said, shifting his voice into a higher pitch, "'Peanut Butter Hoof? Yuck! Not even with Jelly!'"

That made Fluttershy laugh so hard, tea squirted out of her nose. It was scorching hot through her nostrils, but she was too busy laughing to care.

"Oh, Delancey!" she exclaimed. "I've never known any pony as funny as you!"

Delancey smiled at her. "And I've never known any pony with an adorable laugh such as yours."

A touch of pink rose to her cheeks. "I'm so glad you like this place. Most ponies I know are more into coffee shops than teashops."

Delancey glanced around. "Can you keep a secret?"

Nodding, Fluttershy leaned in closer.

"I'm not much for drinking tea," he whispered.

Her eyes widened. "Then why did you agree to come here?"

"To please you, of course," he said with a wink, making Fluttershy blush further. "Then again," he said, levitating his cup into view, "this ginseng isn't half bad. However," he levitated their plate of cucumber sandwiches, "couldn't they stand to cut off the crusts? They're the best part!"

Fluttershy giggled. "You're so strange."

He dropped the plate. "That's a good thing, right?"

She nodded. "You'd get along well with my friend, Pinkie Pie. She likes strange things too."

"When do I get to meet these friends you talk so much about?"

"Well, I've told them about you. I just need to find a time for us to—"

She was cut off by the sound of Spike's voice in her ear. " *Code Red! Code Red! Power Ponies to Headquarters, now!* "

Fluttershy bolted up from her seat, making Delancey cock his head. "Is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, I…I just remembered I promised my roommate I'd…give her dog a bath!"

As she moved past him, he grabbed her hoof. "Do you have to bathe your roommate's dog right this second?"

"Err, yes!" Fluttershy stammered. "B-Because…she gets really cranky if she's not washed before bed! Yes. Sorry, I didn't want to cut our date short but I promised and…"

Delancey gave her a smile of admiration. "Always thinking of others before yourself, I see."

Fluttershy smiled back. "Should we meet here tomorrow?"

He kissed her hoof. "Until then, milady."

As she exited the teashop, Fluttershy squealed giddily in her head.

Fluttershy was the last to arrive at the tower. When the elevator doors opened, she found that the others were already suited up. Embarrassed, she pressed down on her butterfly bracelet and shut her eyes as her suit *whooshed* onto her body.

"What's going on?" Saddle Rager asked, looking around at her teammates. "Where's the Masked Matter-Horn?"

"That's the reason we're here," Humdrum said, holding up a thumb drive. "The Matter-Horn told me to bring you all here and show this if she wasn't back in an hour. Well, it's been over an hour and I'm worried."

"Wherever did she run off to?" Radiance asked.

"She said she was going to 'catch a crook.'" Humdrum inserted the thumb drive into a socket in the monitor's keyboard. "Hopefully whatever's on here will give us some answers."

A file explorer window popped up onscreen. The thumb drive contained only one file, a video labeled *My Disappearance* . With a gulp, Humdrum double-clicked on the video, opening it up.

The video started playing, showing Twilight Sparkle staring at the camera, her study in the background. Her face held a serious expression.

" *Greetings, Power Ponies* ," Twilight said in a forcefully calm tone. " *If you're watching this, it means I've been captured and or killed by the Phoenix* ."

Everyone gasped, Humdrum especially.

" *I'm sorry, team,* " Twilight said onscreen, her voice cracking up. " *But if the Phoenix is who I think it is, there's a chance I won't be coming back after this recording.* " She took a deep breath before continuing. " *Just now, I received an anonymous letter in the mail.* " She levitated the letter into view. " *It read:* Come alone to the place where our names meet. *Judging by the smell of brimstone on the letter, I can only assume this had come from the Phoenix. Well, that and…* "

Closing her eyes, she hung her head. " *I have a pretty good idea of who the Phoenix might be…and she was in my apartment earlier today.* "

Humdrum stiffened. "Wait. Does she mean…?"

" *I know what you're thinking, Spike, and you're right.* " Twilight opened her eyes. " *I have no doubt that the Phoenix is Sunset Shimmer* ."

Mare-velous' eyes widened while Humdrum put his claw to his mouth.

"Sunset Shimmer?" Fili-Second said. "Wasn't that…?"

" *For those of you who don't know* ," Twilight said in the video, " *Sunset Shimmer is an old foalhood of mine. Applejack, Pinkie, you may remember her from my school reunion last week.* "

"I knew it!" Fili-Second exclaimed.

" *But what you may not know is that,* " Twilight said, shutting her eyes shamefully, " *when we were teenagers, Sunset and I experimented with…dark magic.* "

Everyone, save for Mare-velous and Humdrum, gasped.

" *There's no time to tell you the whole story, as the Phoenix is still out there, but to sum it up, she's the reason I became the Masked Matter-Horn. The last spell we worked on together was a Flight Spell, which was meant to grant the power of flight to any non-winged being. We wanted to use it on Spike, who was a baby at the time, because he didn't have wings like other dragons.* "

Mistress Mare-velous looked down at Humdrum and saw the tears in his eyes. That's how she understood that Humdrum hadn't known that part of the story.

" *But we practiced it on ourselves first. Of course, you may have guessed, I was the one who perfected it first, except…I didn't know how to get rid of the wings. Sunset tried to help me, using every spell she could think of, but instead blew up our college dorm. When the security guards came and saw my wings, Sunset jumped in and insisted that* she'd *been the one who cast the spell on me, that I'd been an unwilling participant. She didn't struggle as the guards took her away, and I…I did nothing.* "

There was a pause as Twilight wiped away a tear. Inhaling deeply,

she faced the camera again.

" *I should have told all of you about my history with dark magic, but I was afraid you wouldn't follow me if I did. But you* should *know that since that day, everything I've ever done was to help others who can't help themselves, dark magic included.*

" *Now Sunset's been released from prison, and I thought she was willing to put the past behind us, but the evidence all points to her being the Phoenix, and that her goal is revenge on me."*

She stared down at the letter. " *If my theory is correct, she is asking that I meet her at the corner of Twilight Avenue and Sunset Boulevard. Of course, if I* am *correct, this means that the Phoenix knows I'm the Masked Matter-Horn, and might know some things about all of you as well, which means you are all in terrible danger if I'm unable to stop her. She's smart and unpredictable. Even if you face her together, she'll do her best to outwit you. If the Phoenix decides to let me live, I will try to stall her as long as I can.*

" *However* ," Twilight said, looking into the camera with determination, " *if the Phoenix…defeats me, then I'm leaving Mistress Mare-velous in charge of the team.* "

The heroes turned to Mare-velous, who looked just as surprised as them.

" *I know you can do it, Mare-velous* ," Twilight said, sounding sincere. " *Any other information you need to know is in the Power Ponies' database, which Spike has full access to.* " Her voice cracked again. " *Spike, if…I don't make it out of this, remember that…* " Sniffing, she put her hoof to her muzzle. " *I've never loved anyone more than you.* "

Humdrum buried his face in his claws, causing Mare-velous to wrap her hoof around him in sympathy.

" *Stop the Phoenix* ," Twilight said, her voice faltering. " *And take care of each other. Especially Spike.* " She sniffed. " *Watch over him, Mare-velous.* "

Mare-velous looked up at the screen with wide eyes. Being named the Matter-Horn's successor was one thing, but she had certainly *not* been expecting *that* .

" *Masked Matter-Horn* ," Twilight said, hanging her head as she raised her hoof, " *over and out.* "

As her hoof came down, the video ended. The heroes stared at the blank blue video screen in silence for several minutes. Mare-velous looked down as she felt Humdrum clutch her hoof.

"She's not dead, Sugar Cube," she said softly. "I *know* she isn't." She turned to the others. "If there's one thing I've learned about our leader these past few months, she doesn't go down so easily."

"She's right!" Zapp said, pounding her hooves together. "The Masked Matter-Horn hasn't lost a battle yet!"

"Um," Saddle Rager murmured, "except for when the Phoenix escaped her the other night."

"Yes, yes," Radiance said, waving her hoof, "but even if her opponent is stronger and smarter than her, does she give up without a fight?"

Inhaling sharply, Humdrum wiped away his tears and uttered, "Never."

"Twilight's the reason we all came together," Mare-velous said, releasing Humdrum so she could address the entire team, "and now she needs us more than ever."

"So what are we standing around here for?" Zapp said, thrusting her hoof into the air. "Let's go save our leader!"

Mare-velous shook her head. "Let's go save our *friend* !"

"Yeah!" the Power Ponies said, coming together for a five-way hoof bump.

Humdrum jumped up in vain to reach their hooves.

"Any pony else weirded out by the fact that Twilight just admitted she uses dark magic?" Fili-Second asked suddenly.

Mare-velous looked at her, biting her lip guiltily. "Let's…save the questions for *after* the big rescue."

As the Masked Matter-Horn started coming back into consciousness, she didn't open her eyes immediately, for there was this incessant pounding in her head.

What did she hit me with? A truck *spell?*

She wanted to massage her head, but found that she couldn't move either of her hooves. Based on the tensing of her muscles as she struggled, she deduced that her front hooves were restrained above her head and her back legs sprawled out on the floor.

No, not the floor. My head is falling victim to gravity, which means I must be upright. Against a wall, perhaps. She twisted her hooves and felt cold metal against them. *Cuffs. She doesn't seem like the pony to want to use a rope. Too easy to get out of. Still, cuffs aren't impossible to deal with either.*

Despite her pounding headache, she tried igniting her horn, but something was blocking her magic. The attempt only made her head hurt more.

I shouldn't push myself just yet.

After waiting a few seconds, she finally had the strength to open her eyes. Her vision blurred a moment before coming into focus. The first thing she noticed was that there were no doors or windows. *No way to escape. No way for anyone to peer in and see me trapped here.* The only source of light was a dim bulb suspended from the ceiling, casting a yellow glow over the small room.

It was still enough light to help her see the disturbing sight.

The walls were decorated with photographs, newspaper clippings, and various other paper products…all featuring Twilight.

She recognized some photos of herself and Sunset Shimmer when they were schoolmates, but many photos were more recent. She noticed one photo of her outside Sparkle Labs, talking on her phone as she was getting into her car. Another photo showed her coming out of the car in front of the Power Ponies Headquarters. A picture of her apartment window made the Matter-Horn shiver.

The newspaper clippings bore headlines of Twilight Sparkle's exploits: "Young Scientist Starts Research Lab," "Twilight Sparkle Named Wealthiest Mare in Maretropolis," "Sparkle Labs Discovers Cure For Ponypox," "Billionaire Has New Beau." The last one had a picture of Twilight and Flash Sentry. A red "X" was crossed over Flash's image.

There were clippings of the Masked Matter-Horn's exploits too: "Anonymous Alicorn Assists in Arsonist's Arrest," "Masked Matter-Horn: Maretropolis' New Hero," "Masked Matter-Horn Defeats Magical Duelist," "Masked Matter-Horn and Mistress Mare-velous Form Superhero Team," "Who is the Masked Matter-Horn?"

Apparently, she *found the answer to that question.*

Among the photos and clippings, there were also copies of her personnel file from Sparkle Labs, her résumé, her driver's license, her school records.

How in the world did she manage to get ahold of these?

"Enjoying the view?"

Suddenly, the Phoenix's face appeared, hanging upside-down. Looking up, the Matter-Horn saw that the criminal was using her magic to levitate her hooves.

"As you can see," the Phoenix said with a smirk, "I'm a big fan."

The Matter-Horn grunted as she attempted to use her magic.

"Don't bother," the Phoenix said, righting herself up and lowering to the ground. "I couldn't very well make it *too* easy for you to escape."

She tapped her hoof on the tip of the hero's horn. It made a low

clinging sound that suggested it was different from the metal cap she usually wore with her costume.

"A magical cuff?" the Matter-Horn said, attempting in vain to get a look at her own horn. "Where did you—?"

"Police station," the Phoenix said nonchalantly. "They have so many of them lying around, I bet they haven't realized this one's missing." She chuckled as she admired the bottom of her hoof. "That's how good I am."

"'Good' isn't the word I'd use," the hero said, scowling.

The thief scoffed. "Honestly, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you *let* yourself get captured. It was *too* easy!" She tsked. "Twilie, Twilie, Twilie, don't you know I hate it when you simply *let* me win?"

The Masked Matter-Horn's eyes narrowed further. "Take the mask off."

The Phoenix shrugged. "Alright, I suppose there's no use for it anymore."

Reaching up to her face, she ripped the mask off and shook her head as she let her flaming curly mane loose. Her green eyes bore directly into the hero's as she gave a smile of triumph. The Matter-Horn sighed sadly as she hung her head.

"I had hoped that I'd been wrong."

"But you weren't," Sunset Shimmer said, clapping her hooves. "Just like I knew you'd be! Though out of curiosity, how *did* you figure it out? Did I make it too obvious for you?"

The hero was silent for a moment. "I had my suspicions when you used the Phoenix Charm. I remembered how interested in it you were back in high school, and you were always the most adept at magic."

Sunset flipped her mane. "So true."

"But of course, I couldn't be sure." She raised her head to look at the

criminal. "That's the *real* reason I invited you over."

Sunset shook her head. "I figured you were close."

"My suspicions arose when you mentioned my breakup with Flash, using details you couldn't have possibly known," the Matter-Horn said, glancing around the room, "unless you'd been stalking me."

"A careless error on my part," Sunset said, waving her hoof.

"But after reviewing your prison records…"

The thief snorted. "And I thought *I* was nosy! How'd you enjoy my psychiatric tapes?"

The Matter-Horn avoided her gaze. "It was your riddle that confirmed my theory." The rest she muttered. "You always loved riddles."

Sunset applauded. "Well done, Sparkle. You solved my identity almost as fast as I solved yours."

The hero met her eyes again. "How *did* you find out?"

"Please." Sunset scoffed. "How many lavender unicorns with purple eyes and indigo hair with pink and purple highlights have the ability to cast a Flight Spell? Not to mention the Freeze Ray was your favorite attack spell in combat class. Honestly," she said, waving her mask, "at least I made an *effort* to hide my identity! Though I must say," she tugged on the leg of her suit, "keeping my mane and tail hidden has been a bit constricting."

"But you *wanted* me to recognize you," the Matter-Horn said, finally understanding. "Why else would you send that riddle if you hadn't been expecting it? And at the Maretropolis Museum, you *wanted* to be caught."

"Correction," Sunset said, holding up her hoof. "I wanted to be *seen* ." She chuckled. "Like I'd actually *let* myself be captured." She paused. "Again. So tell me, Twilie," she said, turning her back and walking over to the far wall of pictures, "why would I go out of my way for all of this?"

"You've already confirmed it's not about money or power. So there's only one other explanation."

She could not see Sunset's face, but she suspected she was still smiling maliciously. "And *what* , pray tell, is that?"

The Matter-Horn narrowed her eyes in determination. "Revenge. You want revenge on me, because you went to prison and not me. You pretended that you weren't mad, hoping to throw me off your trail, but you *are* mad. These robberies were only ploys to lure me in, so that you could have the perfect opportunity to destroy me."

Sunset hung her head. "Seems like the most logical answer, doesn't it? After all," she said, placing her hoof on a photograph of Sunset and Twilight at fourteen, "you didn't speak up when the Royal Guards took me away. On top of that, you didn't even bother to visit me in prison."

She clenched her hoof. "Thus, condemning me to ten years of crippling loneliness, keeping no company but the attentive guards, the condescending doctors, the sadistic cellmates, and my own solitary thoughts of self-destruction."

She released a low chuckle. "Yes, it seems like revenge *is* the next logical step. That is," she said, turning around, "if that *wasn't* it."

The Matter-Horn blinked in confusion. "What?"

"Oh, Twilie," Sunset said, shaking her head sadly. "Twilie, Twilie, Twilie." She stepped slowly towards her. "Do you *really* think I'd *ever* want to destroy you? *You* ? My best friend in the world?" She cupped the hero's chin. "It hurts that you would assume the worst from me, Twilight."

"B-B-But," the Matter-Horn said, staring at her, befuddled, "I don't understand. If you're not going to kill me, then what is this all a—?"

"Sweet Celestia, Twilight!" Sunset threw her head back in an exasperated groan. "How is it that you can solve any math equation in the world, yet when it comes to personal relationships, you are positively *dense* ?! No *wonder* Flash broke up with you!"

Now the hero was really confused. "What does Flash have to do with this?"

Sunset looked at her incredulously. "So I was right then. That night we spent together in our dorm was just some…college experiment to you, wasn't it?"

"That night we…?" The Matter-Horn shook her head. "We were teenagers! We were…in the psychosocial stage of identity versus role confusion…"

"And what about earlier today, in the study? Was *that* a case of identity versus role confusion?"

The alicorn's face turned red. "I…I…"

"Good gods, Twilight!" Sunset cried, grabbing her shoulders. "What will it *take* for you to *wake up* ?! Our last night together might've been an experiment to *you* , but to *me* ," her voice cracked as her gaze became softer, "it was *everything* ."

The Matter-Horn stiffened as she felt Sunset's hoof on her neck.

"Ever since you beat me at the scholastic decathlon," Sunset said in a whisper, "I'd been waiting, hoping, *dreaming* for the day you'd notice me, give me some sign that you…that you felt the same way I did. And that night, when you took me in your embrace," she said, her hooves tracing the lavender wings, "and enfolded me in your newly bestowed plumage, I thought I had you, at last."

Then she scowled and gripped the edge of the wings, making the Matter-Horn cry out in pain. "But now I know you were just *experimenting* with me."

The hero's eyes widened as the truth was finally revealed. "Wait. You mean you…you actually…?"

"WHAT ARE YOU *DEAF* ?!" Sunset bellowed, shaking her violently. "EVERYTHING I'VE EVER DONE, EVER SINCE THE DECATHLON, HAS BEEN FOR *YOU* !"

The Matter-Horn blinked. "Everything?"

"EVERYTHING!" Sunset released her as she began pacing the floor. "Why do you think I stopped picking on you? Why do you think I made you stop hanging out with your friends so you could spend more time with me? Why do you think I introduced you to dark magic so you could reach your full potential? Why do you think I helped you take care of that adorable yet annoying little baby dragon you cared about more than me? Why do you think I helped you with that Flight Spell? Why do you think I took the fall when we got caught? Why do you think even after ten years of no word from you that I still *never told the cops you were involved* ?!"

The Matter-Horn was rendered speechless. Sunset took a deep breath to calm herself down.

"Granted, I never confessed. Still, I would've thought the intense moments of passion would've made it *obvious* ."

"I'm not gay," the Matter-Horn said quickly.

Sunset laughed. "You certainly weren't *straight* this morning."

The hero blushed further.

"When I saw how successful you'd become on the news," Sunset said, turning to the section of clippings about Sparkle Labs, "in more ways than one," then the clippings of the Masked Matter-Horn, "I realized there was only one way I could prove to you I was a pony worthy of your time and attention.

"After all," she said with a smirk, "what catches a superhero's attention better," she pointed to a headline reading "Mane-iac Defeated Yet Again," "than a super *villain* ?"

The alicorn's confusion grew as she stared at the black-and-white photo of the Mane-iac.

"Once I was out, I was able to get more," Sunset said, igniting her horn, " *practice* ." She chuckled. "You guessed it, by the way, how I'm able to cast the Phoenix Charm. I did a lot of thinking in that cell, and it didn't take long for me to realize I just needed to treat it like a teleporting spell. As for how I managed to steal the Gauntlets of

Thor undetected, well," she said, stretching her foreleg out proudly, "that's *my* little secret.

"You didn't catch the message I was trying to send by stealing those gauntlets, did you? Or did you forget that they were the subject of our presentation in Mythology Class?"

The Matter-Horn closed her eyes with a groan. "And Queen Neightocris was the subject of our Ancient Anugypt project."

Sunset crossed her hooves smugly. "Stealing the Gauntlets was *too* easy. And frankly, quite *boring* !" She flipped her mane. "The cuffs were *so* much more fun, since I had more," she focused her gaze on the alicorn, "obstacles."

"So I was right then," the Matter-Horn said, opening her eyes. "The first robbery was to get my attention. The second one was to lure me in, let me see who was behind it all."

"To show you how worthy of an opponent I was." Sunset glanced around, as if to check if any pony was watching. "Also, so you would eventually have to call your old friend Sunset Shimmer in for assistance, and lead me to my *true* objective."

She levitated an object into view. The Matter-Horn gasped when she found the Alicorn Amulet hovering in her face.

"How did you—?"

" *Too* easy," Sunset smirked, twirling the necklace around her hoof. "You were so *preoccupied* , you didn't even noticed I'd switched the real one with a fake one." She admired the amulet from all angles. "As I understand, this little piece of jewelry was one of the few things close to defeating you."

The Matter-Horn's eyes widened when she realized what her old friend had in mind. "Sunset, listen to me, that amulet's dangerous. It corrupted Trixie, it'll corrupt you too."

Sunset threw her head back in laughter. "Don't you think I already know that? That Dumb and Idiotic Trixie didn't understand its *true* power. But *I* do.

"Of course," she said, stepping towards the Matter-Horn, "I might not even have to use this. After all," she sent a lustful look that sent a chill up the Matter-Horn's spine, "I have you right where I want you." She placed her hoof on the hero's chest. "Where I've *always* wanted you."

Before the Matter-Horn could say anything, Sunset silenced her with a forceful kiss. The alicorn's eyes remained wide open as Sunset pressed herself against her. Being restrained to the wall, the Matter-Horn had little room to struggle. She tried wrenching her head away, but Sunset hooked her neck with her foreleg to prevent her from escaping. Her other front hoof was clutching the Matter-Horn's flank, while her back leg was brushing against hers.

The hero squealed in protest, wriggling with all her might, but Sunset had her in a tight hold. Any sympathy the Matter-Horn may have had left for her childhood friend was gone. If Sunset was truly her friend, truly *loved* her, she wouldn't be treating her like this.

She felt the villain's mouth open, her tongue tracing the hero's lips. Determined, the Matter-Horn opened her own mouth. As soon as Sunset's tongue entered, she bit down hard on it.

"OW!"

Sunset pulled back and clutched her sore tongue.

"You call this love, Sunset?" the Matter-Horn said, her voice filled with disgust. "I'm cuffed to a wall here! You've blocked my magic! Do you really want me like this? When I have no way of defending myself?"

Sunset stared at her for a long while. For a moment, the Matter-Horn could've sworn she saw a flicker of horror in her eyes, horror at what she had done. Then the thief hung her head as she let out a sorrowful sigh.

"You're right," she said, igniting her horn. "This isn't fair."

Suddenly, the cuffs around the Matter-Horn's ankles unlocked. The hero yelped as she fell to the ground. She touched the tip of her

horn, feeling that that was still cuffed.

"All I ever wanted was to be acknowledged as your equal," Sunset murmured, not daring to meet her gaze, "in every possible way. I can't prove that to you while you are completely defenseless.

"Which is why," she said, pulling her mask back on, much to the Matter-Horn's confusion, "I must take this next step."

She levitated the Alicorn Amulet from the floor and brought it to her chest. The alicorn's eyes widened in horror.

"Sunset?"

"Once upon a time, I was just as intelligent, just as powerful as you, but now," the Phoenix said, raising her eyes to reveal a terrifying, determined look, "you have wings, the one spell I was never able to master. How can I ever be your equal," closing her eyes, she unclasped the necklace, "if I don't have wings like yours?"

"Sunset, no!" the Matter-Horn shouted, holding out her hoof.

But it was too late. The Alicorn Amulet clicked around the Phoenix's neck. The red jewel glowed brightly, and when the Phoenix opened her eyes, they glowed the same sinister color. Smiling maliciously, she powered her horn, its aura now red.

Red light filled the room, forcing the Matter-Horn to shield her eyes. She heard a horrifying scream, followed by a ripping sound. When the hero opened her eyes, the light dimmed enough for her to see the Phoenix hovering above her.

Two enormous red bat wings were sticking out of her back.

"Now, Sparkle," the Phoenix said, her voice echoing at a lower pitch, sounding as if two distinct voices were talking over each other, "we are *true* equals!"

The Matter-Horn's ears perked up as she heard knocking on the wall, followed by some muffled voices. Smiling, she shook her head with a chuckle.

"What's so funny?" the Phoenix asked, raising her brow in confusion.

"We may be equals in magic and intellect, Sunset," the Matter-Horn said, raising her head, "but there's one thing I have that you don't."

The newly transformed bat pony folded her hooves across her chest. "And that is?"

The hero smirked. "Friends."

Just then, a giant pink wrecking ball burst through the wall on the right, making the Phoenix jump in midair. Radiance made her creation disappear as the rest of the Power Ponies, Humdrum included, appeared behind her.

"Did some pony order a rescue?"

"Uh oh," Fili-Second said, looking up at the Phoenix. "Looks like we didn't arrive in time to stop the ultra-supervillain-power-up."

"Big deal," Zapp said, touching her pendant. "That just makes the smack-down a hell of a lot more fun!"

The Phoenix darted her eyes at the Matter-Horn. "I told you to come alone!"

"I did," the Matter-Horn said, rising to her hooves. "But I would never follow a known criminal to a sketchy location without informing a friend of my whereabouts. By the way, giving away the address of your secret hideout? *Not* your best move."

"Matter-Horn!" Humdrum cried, pushing through Mare-velous' legs. "You're alive!"

The Phoenix recoiled in shock at the sight of the dragon. Then she looked at the alicorn in disgust.

"Calling backup is one thing, Twilight," she said, "but involving *Spike* in all of this?! He's just a kid!"

"What do *you* care?" Mistress Mare-velous demanded, placing a

hoof protectively around Humdrum.

The Phoenix clenched her hooves and growled. "He was just as much *my* dragon as he was Twilight's!"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then smiled at the Matter-Horn. "You may have cheated by bringing in new players," she said, her horn igniting, "but you know how much I *love* a challenge!"

"Enough talk!" Zapp cried, raising the Lighting Bolt into the air. "Let's —AH!"

Before she could summon a lighting storm, Zapp was suddenly encased in red light. A quick flash later, a tiny cyan pegasus in Zapp's costume dropped to the floor. Fili-Second caught her quickly.

"Zapp?" Fili said, staring at the baby. "Is that you?"

The foal started crying, sending sparks all over her body. Fili-Second cried out as she was electrocuted and quickly set Baby Zapp down.

"What in the…?" Mare-velous said in amazement.

"She has the Alicorn Amulet!" the Matter-Horn shouted. "It's amplifying her magic!"

"Then let's get it off her!"

"No, you don't understand! It has a magical lock! Only its wearer can remove it!"

"Then why don't we just ask her nicely to take it off?" Saddle Rager asked softly.

The Phoenix threw her head back in laughter. "Your teammates aren't very bright, are they, Twilight?"

The Matter-Horn yelped as she was suddenly levitated up to the Phoenix's eyelevel.

"We, however," the villain said, cupping her chin, "made the *perfect* team. We can still be that way again. With this power, we can do anything we want! We can change the course of history, right all that's wrong with the world, bend time to our will! And more importantly," she used her other hoof to touch the hero's face, "we can do it all together!"

"What you're suggesting," the Masked Matter-Horn said, "it isn't right, Sunset."

The Phoenix scoffed. "Why? Because we'd be using dark magic? Please, *you've* been using dark magic to save ponies for years! How is this any different?"

"Because," the Matter-Horn said, glancing down at a terrified Humdrum, "my motives are to help others. But you," she looked at the villain that was once her friend boldly in the eye, "you only did all this so you could get me, *not* because you cared for any pony."

She could've sworn she saw a flicker of hurt in the Phoenix's expression, but she quickly hid it with a scowl. "Don't *ever* say I never cared for any pony!"

As the villain's horn became redder, Radiance thought quickly and used her bracelets to summon a large baseball bat. She knocked the Phoenix backwards before she could cast whatever spell she had in mind for the Matter-Horn.

"I believe the term is ' *bat* ter-up?'" Radiance said, chuckling as she watched the Phoenix hit the wall, her bat wings smacking flat against it.

The Phoenix groaned as she flapped off the pictures that had come loose from the wall. "I just reorganized this yesterday!" Scowling, she ignited her horn. "Let's take this outside!"

Then she blew a hole in the ceiling, revealing the night sky above. The Matter-Horn flew out of the way before the debris could fall down on her. The Phoenix flapped her wings hard as she whooshed through the hole.

"After her!" the Matter-Horn cried, clutching her cuffed horn. "And some pony help me with this!"

Radiance hovered upwards on a magic carpet, Saddle Rager fluttered her wings nervously, while Fili-Second zipped off. Mistress Mare-velous stayed behind to unclasp the cuff around their leader's horn.

"Thanks," the alicorn said, tapping the tip of her free horn.

"After this," Mare-velous said, hooking her lasso onto a rafter, "we're gonna have a serious talk about yerr taste in mares."

The Matter-Horn groaned as the earth mare swung through the ceiling, annoyed at the insinuation as well as the fact that she was right.

"You shouldn't have come here, Spike," the Matter-Horn said, looking down at the dragon. "I told you how dangerous Sunset's become."

"Like I was gonna leave ya hanging," Humdrum said with a smile, "especially after you tried to give me wings."

"Spike, I was going to tell you, but I soon learned the spell would only work on the individual casting it…"

"It's okay, really. I don't need wings, when I have you."

Shaking her head, the alicorn crouched down, allowing him to climb on her back.

"So your worst fear came true, huh?" Humdrum asked as she took off. "I guess she *hasn't* changed."

"No, Spike," the Matter-Horn muttered under her breath. "She's changed a *lot* . The worst part is," she said as they soared through the hole, "it's all my fault."

The rooftop battle had already begun. The super powered Phoenix was firing spells at the heroes. Radiance did her best to counteract them with her shields. She then summoned a large tennis racket

and attempted to swat at the villain, but the Phoenix simply ducked and laughed.

"Fool me once," she said, flying towards the unicorn. "It's sad, really, how you waste such precious stones on childish parlor tricks and," she blocked an incoming giant pink teapot, "pointless objects."

Radiance huffed. "It does not matter the style of the weapon," she said, summoning an enormous threading needle, "as long as it does its work on ruffians like you!"

As the needle plunged towards the Phoenix, she merely smirked and summoned a giant pin cushion into the needle's path.

"You have *no idea* what kind of power you have, do you?" the Phoenix said, shaking her head with a chuckle. "Absolutely *clueless* !"

Radiance blinked. "Whatever are you going on about?"

She cried out as the Phoenix suddenly swooped down and took her in her hooves.

"You didn't even bother to *question* where your bracelets came from?" the villain said, bringing Radiance's eyes to hers. "Or were you too concerned about whether or not they would complement your latest jumpsuit design, Rarity Belle?"

The unicorn's eyes widened. "I…don't know what you're…"

"Next time you make your own superhero suit," the Phoenix said, releasing her and catching her again with her magic, "don't endorse yourself on live television."

When they were ten feet above the building, the Phoenix released her magical hold on her. Radiance stuck out her hooves but gasped when she realized her bracelets were gone. Looking up, she saw the Phoenix holding up her own hooves, waving the bracelets tauntingly.

"Oh dear," Radiance squeaked when she saw how close the roof was getting. "HELP!"

The Masked Matter-Horn caught Radiance with her magic and lowered her gently to the rooftop.

"She just…" Radiance said, her tongue stumbling. "She took…how did…?"

"Tell me, Rarity," the Phoenix said, admiring the bracelets on her hooves, "do these go well with my eyes?"

Radiance narrowed her gaze at her.

"You're right. Emeralds would be *so* much better."

She used her magic to turn the bracelets green, which made Radiance's jaw drop.

"I had no idea your bracelets could change color!" Fili-Second said.

"Neither did I," Radiance muttered under her breath.

The Phoenix's laughter was cut off as she was suddenly ensnared by Demeter's Lasso.

"Ya may have a lot of fancy magic," Mistress Mare-velous said, tightening her mental grip, "but it's useless against the power of the gods!"

But the villain seemed unfazed by this setback as she grinned down at Mare-velous. "Ah, Applejack Smith."

Mistress Mare-velous jumped back in surprise.

"Now *you're* a mare who knows what she's doing. Almost as good a hero as Twilight. I must say, I deeply sympathize with your tragic backstory. And I appreciate how much you value honesty, but it hardly seems fair to attempt to squeeze it out of others and not be completely honest with them yourself."

"W-What are ya talkin' about?" Mare-velous asked, trying to mask her uneasiness.

"Tell me," the Phoenix said, locking eyes with the blonde mare, "do

your teammates know what you plan to do with Longhorn once you find him?"

Mistress Mare-velous was silent for a moment, before she started mentally yanking on the rope, bringing the Phoenix down to the roof.

"I thought so," the villain said, shrugging her shoulders. "The thread of honesty is just oh so delicate, isn't it?"

Grinning, the Phoenix ignited her horn, encasing the rope in a red aura. Mistress Mare-velous cried out and clutched her head as she experienced a sudden migraine. The rope then fell away from the Phoenix like an unraveled scarf.

"What the…?" Mare-velous said once she realized what had happened. "How did…?"

"How dare you?!" Saddle Rager said, her eyes reddening as she started growing. "How dare you play with my friend's emotions?!"

As Saddle Rager became her enormous, angry self, the Phoenix simply rolled her eyes. "Please."

She then fired a red beam at the monster, sending her flying back over the edge of the roof. Fili-Second didn't waste a second as she zoomed down the fire escape and caught her friend, who had shrunk back to normal and was rendered unconscious. Radiance, Mare-velous, Humdrum and the Matter-Horn looked over the edge and sighed in relief.

"Vassal of Discord," the Phoenix said with a huff. "He shouldn't have wasted his energy on some pony so pathetic. I mean what kind of namby-pamby name is Fluttershy Buttercream?"

"How do you know so much about my team?" the Matter-Horn demanded.

"You really think I'd face you without learning about your little playmates? I had to be prepared in case they showed up. For example," the Phoenix said, wrapping the now glowing red rope around her shoulders like a boa, "since Saddle Rager was able to break through Demeter's Lasso, I knew the only thing that could

resist its power was chaos magic." She smirked. "That's why I spent all this month studying it."

Fili-Second appeared on the roof, panting as she gently laid Saddle Rager on the roof.

"And I figured if chaos magic is the source of Saddle Rager's power," the Phoenix said, folding her hooves proudly, "chaos magic was the only thing strong enough to counteract it." She turned to Fili-Second. "As for you, Pinkamena Diane Pie…"

"YOU'RE A BIG MEANIE!" the pink mare cried, preparing to charge.

But in a split second, the Phoenix was able to fire at Fili-Second, encasing her in a yellow bubble. Fili-Second was moving at an incredibly slow speed.

"It's amazing what you can do with time-altering spells," the Phoenix said with a giggle.

"What do we do now?" Radiance asked the remaining team members. "She's practically removed all our powers!"

"Just because we don't have our powers," Mare-velous said, reaching for her horseshoes, "doesn't mean we can't fight!"

She tossed two horseshoes at Phoenix, who didn't even bother summoning a shield and simply flapped out of the way.

"Oh," Mare-velous said, her face paling.

"I think it's time we leveled the playing field," the Phoenix said, powering her horn.

Before any pony could react, Mistress Mare-velous and Radiance were suddenly bound by red chains, forced to go down.

" *Too* easy," the Phoenix said, blowing on her hoof.

Scowling, the Matter-Horn levitated Humdrum off her back and rose up to the villain. "Perhaps you'd prefer a *real* challenge."

"Finally!" The Phoenix clapped her hooves together. "I was beginning to think you'd *never* make your move!"

"Twilight!" Humdrum hollered, reaching his claw out.

"Stay out of this, Spike!" the Matter-Horn shouted, not taking her eyes off her opponent. "This is between me and her!"

The Phoenix smiled in triumph. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

She shot a red beam at her. The Matter-Horn merely tilted her head out of the way. Fortunately, the laser only hit a satellite dish. There was a collective "ARGH!" as all the televisions in that building suddenly went static.

The Phoenix's next attack was a fireball the size of an asteroid. The Matter-Horn quickly summoned an ice shield. Both spells evaporated into steam upon contact.

"Quit holding back on me, Twilie!" the Phoenix hollered, a twinge of annoyance in her voice. "I *know* you can do better!"

"I don't want to fight you, Sunset," the Masked Matter-Horn said calmly. "You're sick. I can get you the help you need."

The villain shook her head. "You sound just like Dr. Bliss. Like I told her, I'm not sick. I've never seen more clearly." She pointed to the Alicorn Amulet. "I finally see that the only way to win you is by *besting* you!"

She flew above the hero and fired a beam as thick as a Gracian column. The Matter-Horn counteracted it with a beam of her own.

"By *cheating* !" she grunted, fighting against the spell. "You've already accomplished so much on your own," she overpowered the Phoenix, sending her backward, but not inflicting damage, "why use the Alicorn Amulet?"

The Phoenix panted as she flapped her wings to regain balance. "Because of your stupid wings! No matter how hard I tried, no matter how many times I shouted those dumb Pony Latin words, I *still* couldn't get the blasted things to sprout!" She let out a wail of

annoyance. "How is it that I can burst myself into flames and come out without a single burn, but I can't grow bucking wings?!"

The Matter-Horn flew back a few feet when she saw her opponent power her horn.

"What makes you so special?!"

The hero deflected the incoming swirling flaming vortex with a snowball of equal size. There was so much steam that the Matter-Horn was temporarily blinded as her goggled fogged up.

"Maybe," she said, wiping her goggles with her mane, "it's because whenever I cast the Flight Spell, I'm never thinking of myself." She looked around for her enemy. "The first time I cast it, I was thinking of Spike. And every time since then, I've thought of the ponies who needed a hero to save them, the ponies who needed," she stuck out her chest as the steam cleared, "the Masked Matter-Horn."

The Phoenix caught her by surprise by tackling her from the side, bringing them both onto the rooftop next-door.

"Even after all these years," the villain said, pinning the hero's shoulders to the concrete, "you still give the *corniest* speeches!"

Narrowing her eyes, the Matter-Horn bucked her hips upward, knocking the Phoenix forward. The Matter-Horn then used her magic to throw her completely off her body. Flapping her wings, the hero rose above her adversary.

"This fight won't solve anything, Sunset," the Matter-Horn said. "Don't you see? Even if you win, it won't make me love you." Her eyes filled with sadness. "You'll become my enemy forever."

The Phoenix used her wings to lift herself up. "Better than being ignored."

The battle raged on as the once friends bombarded each other with attack after attack. From laser beam, to freeze rays, to fireballs, to pie showers, to stampeding elephants, to lions made of lightning. And every spell was counteracted with another, meeting it in the middle with an explosion of magic. To the Masked Matter-Horn, it

looked as if this battle was going to go onto infinity. Even with the Alicorn Amulet, she and Sunset were still equally matched, even more so than when they battled in dueling class. At least then, one of them would eventually come out on top, but this time, it looked as if there would be no winner.

"Give it up, Twilie!" the Phoenix hollered, firing another fireball to be met with an ice shield. "I know all your moves, all your strategies! You can't win!"

Just as the Matter-Horn's ice shield evaporated, a purple beam came too fast for her to respond. It hit her square in the stomach, sending her back several feet. She landed on the roof of a building two blocks away. Grunting in pain, the Matter-Horn looked down at her stomach to see a gaping hole in her costume, surrounding a bulging, purple bruise. Clutching her stomach, she saw that the Phoenix was flapping towards her.

I need to get her to take off that amulet, otherwise this battle is never going to end! But how? She won't stop until she's beaten me!

Then she paused in her panting and looked up, her eyes widening as an idea occurred to her. The Phoenix was now hovering above her, smiling, powering up her horn to inflict the final blow.

"Don't worry, this spell won't kill you," she said. "It'll just hurt a *lot* ."

Decidedly, the Masked Matter-Horn closed her eyes and muttered, "You win."

The Phoenix's horn was out like a candle. "What?"

Still holding her stomach, the hero slowly rose to her hooves, her legs shaking. "You're right, Sunset. I can't beat you. You're…you're better than me."

Her adversary looked at her in disbelief. "You're…giving up?"

"Yes," the Matter-Horn murmured, raising her eyes to meet hers. "I surrender."

The Phoenix appeared positively stunned, as if she hadn't expected

this. "B-But…there are so many spells you have yet to try, so many attacks, so many defenses!"

"It wouldn't matter. You'd beat me anyway." She winced as she cradled her stomach. "I see no point in going any further."

"But you never give up," the Phoenix said, her voice cracking. "You're…you're a hero."

"All heroes are destined to fall at some point." She bowed her head. "And even a hero can admit when she's met her match."

There was silence between them for a long while as the Phoenix stared at the defeated hero, unsure of what to do.

"So go ahead," the Matter-Horn said, removing her hoof from her stomach and placing it on the ground. "Finish me. Or use your new magic to make me love you. Do whatever you want. You've won." She lowered her head further. "You finally have me right where you want me."

She shut her eyes, prepared for what was to come. Several moments passed, and nothing happened. Opening her eyes, the Matter-Horn looked up at the Phoenix, who wore a horrified expression. Their gazes met, and in the villain's eyes, the Matter-Horn could see her old friend.

Finally, the Phoenix slumped her shoulders, releasing an exasperated sigh. Raising her hoof to her neck, she pulled the Alicorn Amulet off.

Back at the Phoenix's hideout, the chains around Mare-velous and Radiance disappeared, Fili-Second's time bubble popped, and Zapp transformed back into an adult. The pegasus looked down, saw that she was still sucking on her hoof and pulled it out of her mouth in disgust.

The bat wings evaporated into thin air and the Phoenix dropped to the ground, forcing her to release the necklace. As the Masked Matter-Horn approached her, the Phoenix was looking downward, panting heavily, and the hero could have sworn she heard sobbing.

Gazing sympathetically down at her, she levitated the Alicorn Amulet from the floor and tucked it under her wing.

"I knew you couldn't do it," the Matter-Horn said, crouching down to her level. "You *love* a challenge. It's no fun if you win by forfeit." She whispered, "Checkmate."

The Phoenix did not respond for a while, and then scoffed. "Touché, Twilie. Looks like you know me better than I know myself." She raised her head a little, but did not look her in the eye. "You truly are my equal."

The Matter-Horn stood and held out her hoof. "Let's go, Sunset."

"Oh no." She shook her head. "I know how this plays out. You've defeated me, so now you're going to take me back to jail, which I'll of course break out of, and then you'll put me back in, and it'll be an endless cycle of cat and mouse."

"It doesn't have to be that way, Sunset. You can get treatment, you can change for the better, you can," she caught her breath, "we can be friends again."

The Phoenix let out a maniacal chuckle that made the hero's skin crawl. "But that's the thing, Twilight. Even if they let me out again, I'll be even more of an outcast now. This goes beyond one college mishap. Don't you understand?"

"Not if you show them you're a good pony. And I know you are." The Matter-Horn stretched her hoof out further. "Please, prove that I'm right, that you're still my friend."

There was another long period of silence. Then the Phoenix raised her head fully, revealing a mischievous grin.

"Remember when we read *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in tenth grade?"

Confused by the sudden question, the Matter-Horn scrunched her nose and replied, "Err, yes?"

"Remember the dilemma Marguerite faced on whether or not to reveal to the Prench revolutionists the Scarlet Pimpernel's identity?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with—?"

"Are you Marguerite, Twilight?"

The Matter-Horn's mouth remained open, unsure of how to respond.

"Basically," the Phoenix said, leaning forward, "if you squeal on me," she whispered in her ear, "I'll squeal on you."

Suddenly, the thief burst into flames, making the Masked Matter-Horn jump back.

"Sunset?" she cried, looking around. "Sunset?!"

But once again, the Phoenix had vanished into thin air.

When the Masked Matter-Horn returned to the Phoenix's hideout, the rest of the team was back inside the building. The alicorn flew in through the hole in the roof and saw what they were all gaping at.

The walls were completely bare. The newspaper clippings, photographs, and cuffs that had held the Matter-Horn had disappeared entirely. The only things left in the room sat in the middle of the floor: Thor's Gauntlets, the cuffs of Neightocris, Radiance's bracelets and Demeter's Lasso.

"What happened?" their leader asked.

"We don't know," Zapp said. "The wall suddenly caught fire and then everything was gone."

"But there's no ash or anythin'," Mare-velous said. "The walls weren't even burnt."

"What happened to the Phoenix?" Radiance asked.

"She, um," the Matter-Horn said, levitating the Alicorn Amulet into view, "got away."

Mare-velous' eyes widened. "How did ya get that off her?"

"Hey, Mare-velous!" Fili-Second cried, zipping into the room—the team hadn't even realized she had gone. "You've gotta see this place! The kitchen is huge, and the first floor has got so much space I've already picked out the perfect spot for a display case and a couple tables and chairs and I was thinking we could put a jukebox in the corner and—"

"What are ya talkin' about, Fili?" Mare-velous asked.

"Duh! This is the place!"

"What place?"

" *The* place! It's the perfect place for our bakery!"

"Bakery?" everyone said.

"Of course! It's only a few blocks away from Headquarters to make coming to and fro easier for us I mean mostly you because you don't have super speed and with the multiple floors I can live above the store and you can even move in with Fluttershy if you want to but if not I can at least be here for late-night deliveries and it would make openings so much easier—"

"Fili," Mare-velous said, putting her hoof to her forehead, "let me get this straight. You wanna use a villain's abandoned evil lair for our bakery?"

"Why not?" Fili-Second said with a shrug. "She's not using it anymore. Besides," she said in a whisper, "once word gets out that a thief used to live here, it's sure to lose its value on the market! We could get it cheap!"

"Fili," Mare-velous said, shaking her head, "this has gotta be the craziest—"

"Just take a look around!"

"Whoa!" the blonde mare cried out as she grabbed her hoof and dragged her through the hole in the wall.

"Fili!" the others heard Mare-velous shout. "Fili, I'm tellin' ya this isn't

—oh, hey! There *is* a lotta space down here!"

"So, uh," Zapp said, shaking off the weird scene, "what happened, chief? Did ya force her to take the necklace off or something?"

The Matter-Horn looked sadly down at the Alicorn Amulet and then at the pile of stolen objects. "I'll tell you back at Headquarters."

Once Twilight had finished relaying the events of her capture, leading up to the Phoenix's escape, her teammates stared at her in stunned silence for the longest time. Rainbow Dash was the first to speak.

"So, uh…you and the Phoenix, uh…"

After a quick glance at Spike, she touched her hooves together, cringing awkwardly. Twilight nodded solemnly.

"Wow," Pinkie Pie said. "And I thought *I* had a freaky taste in mares."

"I'm not into mares," Twilight said insistently.

There were a lot of huffs and eye rolls.

"I'm not!"

"Sure, you're not," Applejack said, not sounding the least bit convinced.

"Why didn't you tell us all this before?" Rarity asked.

"I didn't know," Twilight said. "I mean I didn't know she was in love with me…"

"Sheesh, Twilight!" Pinkie exclaimed. "After she banged you *twice* , how could you *not* know?!"

"The point is," Twilight said, lowering her head, "I should've told you about my history with her. My history with…dark magic. We are a

team now, I should've trusted in all of you, but…I was afraid of what you'd all think of me."

"Twilight," Rainbow said, crossing her hooves. "I practically *stole* Zeus' Lightning Bolt from the museum." She touched her pendant. "If it hadn't been for Daring Do's sweet-talking, I'd be a branded criminal."

"And I only got my bracelets because I took advantage of a rich mare's sudden inclination for charity," Rarity said. "Funny how she never got angry that I never paid her back."

"And Fluttershy got her powers from an evil chaos god who plots to take over the world," Pinkie said rapidly, making Fluttershy blush.

"So what are you saying?" Twilight said sharply. "That we are no better than Sunset Shimmer?"

"We're *saying* ," Rainbow Dash said, "that we're not perfect either. We all have our flaws."

"Not *that* many," Rarity said, self-consciously taking out her compact mirror.

"And we all have our dark pasts," Applejack said, placing a hoof on Twilight's shoulder, "and it's like you said, if we're gonna be a team, we're gonna have to be completely honest with each other."

Twilight smiled slightly. "Thanks, girls. Still, I can't shake the guilt I feel over Sunset Shimmer."

"Should we tell the cops that she's the Phoenix?" Rainbow asked.

Their leader shook her head. "Her last words to me were: 'If you squeal on me, I'll squeal on you.' That means if I reveal her identity to any pony else, she'll reveal my identity to the world."

"So…we just…do nothing?"

"For now," Twilight said, looking out the large window showing the view of Maretropolis, "until Sunset makes her next move."

Rainbow tapped her chin. "How do ya know she won't reveal your identity anyway?"

"She won't." Twilight shook her head. "It would be against the rules of the game she's started. Besides," she muttered, "she loves me." She hung her head. "It's…unsettling, having some pony so…so morally ambiguous… *love* you."

"I know what that's like," Fluttershy said quietly.

"Me too," Pinkie Pie said with a sad sigh. "Still waiting for Sonata to call me."

"The Mane-iac might not have *loved* me," Rarity said, "but she certainly cared about me to…some degree."

Applejack chuckled. "Next thing ya know, Rainbow will be gettin' it on with Trixie."

The absurdity of the idea made everyone laugh, besides Twilight and, of course, Rainbow. She glared at the orange mare and then had an idea of her own.

"Or maybe," Rainbow said, nudging Applejack in the shoulder, "Applejack will be making out with Longhorn!"

Applejack scowled at her. "Watch it!"

Regardless though, she giggled. After a while, Twilight looked around at her laughing teammates and started laughing too. Spike then let out a yawn.

"It's getting late," Twilight said, patting the dragon on the back. "We should all be getting some rest."

"I'll watch the monitors tonight," Applejack said, rising from the couch.

The others nodded in agreement as they made their way to the elevator. Spike hugged Twilight's legs tight.

"Thanks for not dying," he whispered.

Smiling, Twilight returned his hug. "Go upstairs and sleep."

He ran to catch the elevator with the others. Twilight was about to join them when Applejack called out, "Twilight?"

The unicorn turned around as the elevator doors shut. Applejack looked down at the floor, confusion on her face.

"In the video," she said slowly, "of all the ponies on the team, why did ya pick *me* for the job?"

"Oh," Twilight said, turning her body fully towards her. "I thought you were the obvious candidate. You've had the most experience, you're calculative, you have all the qualities of leadership—"

"No, no, I got *that* ." She raised her eyes to meet her gaze. "I'm talkin' about Spike. Why did ya ask *me* to take care of him? I mean…I like the little guy, but I barely know him, and he barely knows me."

Twilight looked at her sincerely. "I know about your family history, Applejack. I know when your parents died, you had to help raise your little sister. You care for her, right?"

Applejack shut her eyes. "I'd give my life for Apple Bloom."

"And you'd give your life for Spike too. You may not know each other well, but when he's in trouble in battle, you're almost always the first to jump in front of him. Surely you've noticed."

"Of course," Applejack said, opening her eyes. "He's a member of the team, and he doesn't have any powers to defend himself with."

"And he reminds you of your sister."

Applejack's jaw clenched as she processed this claim. After a moment, she realized Twilight was right, although Applejack had never really thought about it before.

"You see, Applejack," Twilight said, "you not only possess the qualities of a leader, but as a *protector* ." She smirked. "In more ways than one."

Applejack nodded in agreement. "Ya really should've told us about Sunset, ya know? I mean I get ya had your reasons but…" She looked down at her hooves. "Since my parents were killed, I've…had a hard time openin' up to ponies. *Really* openin' up to them. It wasn't until we started this whole thing that I…I started trustin' ponies again." She lifted her gaze again. " *You* did that for me."

"You're right," Twilight said. "Which is why, when push comes to shove, you're the pony I'd trust most with the team…and Spike."

The two mares smiled at each other, feeling a long-needed sense of understanding.

"Hey," Twilight said, "you'll…check up on Spike, make sure he gets to sleep, right?"

"You're not stayin'?" Applejack asked.

The unicorn looked out the window at the city. "There's something I need to take care of."

Flash was awoken by a knocking at his door. Glancing at his alarm clock, he let out a groan as he switched on the lamp, rolled out of bed and dragged himself across his tiny one-room apartment. When he opened the door, he looked at his visitor in surprise.

"Twilight?" he said sleepily, rubbing his eyes. "What are you doing here? It's four in the morning."

"I know," Twilight said, biting her lip. "I, uh, needed to talk to you."

He groaned in exhaustion. "Couldn't it have waited until dawn?"

"It's…kind of important."

Seeing the distress in her eyes, he opened the door further to let her in.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Sitting on the bed, Twilight said, "I'm sorry."

He blinked. " *You're* sorry?" He sat down beside her. "Twilight, *I* was the one who made things a whole lot worse by…" He shook his head, not wanting to think about it. "It was uncalled for."

"But you were right, about me not trusting you. I just…I just wasn't sure of where we were and whether or not you were ready to hear…"

She trailed off as tears started coming.

"Hey, hey," Flash said, cupping her chin. "It's okay. You don't have to tell me anything."

"But I *want* to. I *want* to be honest with you."

Then she proceeded to tell him about Sunset Shimmer, their shenanigans in high school and college, their… *complicated* relationship, and their dark magic practices that eventually led to Sunset's arrest. In compliance with Sunset's threat, she left out the part about the Phoenix.

"Turns out she still has feelings for me," Twilight said, "after all this time." She blushed. "By the way, we may have…"

She stopped, but Flash understood.

"Do you love her?" he asked in a tone devoid of judgment.

She bit her lip. "I…care for her. She's my best friend."

"I see," Flash said, turning to look at the wall. "Thanks…for telling me."

"Are you mad?"

"Mad? So you made a few mistakes when you were young, Twilight, so what?" He leaned in to whisper, "You know I once tried a cigarette at thirteen?" He held up his hoof. " *Just* once! But that's okay, because we're ponies, and ponies aren't perfect.

"Besides," he said with a smile, "it's good to know that there's more to you than what the newspapers say, that you're just as imperfect as the rest of us. It makes you more…three-dimensional."

That made Twilight smile a bit. "It's funny. In the crazy world that is my life, you're the only thing that feels normal. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

There was silence for a while.

"So," Flash said, turning to her, "are there any other dark secrets I should know about?"

Twilight hesitated. "No."

"Okay, so, uh…" He glanced at the clock. "I have an early shift, and I'm pretty sure you've got somewhere to be in the morning too, so…"

He trailed off as he felt Twilight's hoof on his. When he met her eyes, he saw that they were shiny with tears. Then she leaned forward and gently pressed her lips against his. Feeling her need for comfort, Flash closed his eyes and kissed her back.

The bedside lamp then switched off as if by magic.

What? You thought I was gonna have Sunset be reformed and then she and Twilight live happily ever after because I ship them so much?

Fooled ya.

I will make this perfectly clear. Given the circumstances of this story, there will be no AppleSpike shipping (in this fic, he's 10 and she's 24). However, they will still have friendship moments because I like seeing them together.

Let's see who can catch the superhero references in this chapter.

Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 1

" *I don't give up on friendships easily, and when I do, it's because they gave up first."*

- WorkingWomen

Trixie laughed maniacally as she zoomed down the street in a magically-powered scooter, pursued by Mistress Mare-velous, Radiance, and the Masked Matter-Horn who carried Humdrum on her back.

"You'll never catch the Great and Powerful Trixie, Power Ponies!" the magician cried, holding up a golden ice cream scooper. "Thanks to the legendary Golden Ice Cream Scooper of Shanghay, soon all of Maretropolis' citizens will be transformed into delicious frozen treats!"

"I swear that gal's just runnin' out of ideas!" Mare-velous exclaimed.

"I know what you mean, darling," Radiance said from her magic carpet. "I mean what could she possibly hope to gain from turning every pony into ice cream?"

"What I wanna know is," Fili-Second said, skidding beside her teammates, "why a mystical Golden Ice Cream Scooper that can turn ponies into ice cream exists in the first place?"

"Fili!" Mistress Mare-velous hollered. "You're supposed to be helpin' Zapp make sure those ponies don't melt!"

"Oh, right! Sorry!"

Fili-Second zipped back down the street, where Zapp was preparing clouds of snow. Scattered throughout the streets were blobs of ice cream shaped like ponies with terrified expressions on their faces.

"How's the snowfall coming along?" Fili-Second asked.

"It should drop the temperature enough to keep them cool," Zapp said, wincing as she concentrated on the Lightning Bolt. "You might want to get some more blocks of ice, just in case."

"On it!"

Zapp heard her whiz off and back again.

"And don't even think about eating the ice cream!"

"Aw!" Fili-Second said, her tongue sticking out towards an ice cream pony. "Just *one* lick?"

"Fili! These are living ponies!"

The pink pony brought her tongue back in. "I was just kidding!"

Meanwhile, the Matter-Horn was trying to slow Trixie down with her Freeze Ray. The villain only laughed as she swerved her scooter away from the shots.

"Trixie thought it was perfect!" she said, waving the scooper tauntingly. "Why fight fire with fire, when you can fight ice with *ice* ?!"

Just as they were passing Bray Jewelers, an alarm sounded.

"I've got it," Mare-velous said, getting her rope ready. "Y'all can handle Trixie."

"Let me come with you!" Humdrum insisted, waving.

"Thanks, but I've got this."

The dragon called out her name as she turned towards the jewelry store, but she didn't even look back. Two masked creatures crashed through the windows with burlap sacks over their shoulders. Despite their poor disguises, Mare-velous recognized them as two of the Diamond Dogs.

"Not *you* mutts again!" she said, skidding to a stop. "Didn't I just land

your rumps in jail a week ago?"

"Who are you calling 'mutts?!'" Rover spat. "And, uh…you've never seen us before in your life!"

Mare-velous rolled her eyes. "Cut the act, Rover! I know it's you! Now," she said, tightening her lasso, "hand over the loot before someone gets hurt."

The larger one, Fido, smirked. "You mean like…you?"

Raising her eyebrow in confusion, she failed to notice the gray truck speeding towards her until the last second. Jumping out of the way, she saw the smaller member of the trio was driving the truck.

"How in the hay are ya able to reach the pedals?" she wondered aloud.

"Step on it, Spot!" Rover called as he and Fido hopped into the back of the truck.

The truck was off in a jiffy.

"Hey!" Mistress Mare-velous called.

Looking around for ideas, she spotted a teenage colt with a skateboard.

In the truck, the Diamond Dogs were laughing in triumph as they ruffled through their bags of jewelry.

"Look at all these gems!" Rover said, throwing a handful of diamonds up into the air.

"We've hit the jackpot!" Fido said, holding an emerald necklace to his chest.

"And did you see the look on that Mistress *Dubious'* face?"

"We got her good!"

Spot's laughter ceased when he caught a reflection in the side

mirror. "Um…guys? We've got a tailgater!"

"What?" Rover said, throwing open the doors.

He and Fido gaped when they saw Demeter's Lasso hooked onto their rear bumper. On the other end, Mistress Mare-velous was holding on tight with her front hooves, her back hooves riding on a skateboard.

"Mind if I hitch a ride?" she called.

Rover growled in aggravation. "I've had just about enough of this mare!"

He drew a gun from his vest, making the hero gasp.

"Oh snap."

Hearing the gunshots, Humdrum turned his head to see the Diamond Dogs' truck driving up behind them. Mistress Mare-velous was swiveling her skateboard to dodge the bullets.

"She needs help!" Humdrum said, leaping off the Matter-Horn's back.

"Humdrum!" the Masked Matter-Horn called as she watched the dragon run towards the truck. "Wait!"

"We'll help them out later!" Radiance said, raising her carpet higher. "I'll find another route so I can cut Trixie off!"

Humdrum caught up to the truck and jumped onto the passenger door, grabbing the handle. Of course, at that speed, the door had been locked automatically.

"Ya see, Ma?" Mare-velous said, ducking from another bullet. "This is why I don't like guns."

As she maneuvered to the right, she spotted Humdrum dangling on the side of the truck, making her eyes widen.

"Humdrum?! What the hay are ya doin'?!"

"Huh?" Rover and Fido said, looking at each other in confusion.

"Get off of there! Right now!"

But the dragon didn't listen. Clenching his claw into a fist, he smashed through the passenger window, causing Spot to jump. Humdrum cried out as he fell into the passenger seat.

"Pull over!" he demanded, standing up. "Now!"

He was met with laughter as Fido snatched him up. Mare-velous gasped as Rover held his revolver to Humdrum's head.

"Let us go," Rover hollered, "or the little dragon gets it!"

Mare-velous stiffened as a voice from her past echoed in her head: "*Don't nobody move! Or the filly gets it!*"

Demeter's Lasso stopped glowing and her hooves let it drop to the ground. The Diamond Dogs cackled as the distance between them and the hero grew, and they passed by Trixie on her scooter. They looked at her curiously.

"Hi, boys!" Trixie giggled, giving them a flirtatious wave. "Great day for crime, huh?"

Flattered, the Diamond Dogs waved back, including Spot. All four criminals were too distracted to see the enormous pink baseball mitt they were headed for. They all cried out as they made impact. Rover and Fido fell forward, dropping the gun and Humdrum.

"Phew!" Humdrum said, leaping excitedly to his feet. "We did it! Yeah!" He thrust his claws into the air. "Power Ponies rule!"

His excitement died down when the Masked Matter-Horn flapped into view and Mistress Mare-velous skateboarded up to the truck. Both of them had their forelegs crossed. Humdrum looked between them in confusion.

"What?"

Once all of Maretropolis' citizens had been turned back to normal, thanks to a reversal spell the Matter-Horn had found inscribed on the Golden Ice Cream Scooper, and all the jewels had been returned, the Masked Matter-Horn and Mistress Mare-velous went into one of the bedrooms in Power Pony Headquarters to…discuss things.

"That boy *should not* be out in the field!" Mare-velous shouted, pacing the room. "He's too young and inexperienced!"

"You've said this about every other member of this team," the Matter-Horn said carefully, "and you've been proven wrong every single time!"

"This is different!" The earth mare stopped to face her. "It's not that I think Spike's incapable, it's the fact that he's only ten years old and doesn't even have any powers!"

"One doesn't need powers to be a hero. Your mother didn't have any powers."

Mare-velous narrowed her eyes. "Don't you bring my ma into this! Besides, she was a grown-up, she knew what she was gettin' into! Spike's just a kid!"

"He may be a kid, but he's shown more resourcefulness and integrity than any grown-up I've ever seen."

"When he's workin' behind the scenes! Out in the field, he's just gonna get himself killed!" Her voice became softer. "Ya saw what almost happened today."

"I know." The Matter-Horn sighed. "What he did was reckless, and I've already talked with him about it."

"Look," Mistress Mare-velous said, crossing her forelegs, "ya said that if anything happens to ya, responsibility for Spike goes to me. Well, as his backup guardian, I say this hero biz is too dangerous for him right now, and he should go back to workin' the monitors until he's ready."

"I appreciate your input, Applejack, but as his *current* guardian, *I'm*

the one who will be making the decisions for Spike, and I say the only way he's going to learn the difficulties of being a hero is through experience."

Mare-velous blinked. "Wait. Ya mean you—?"

"Of *course* I don't like him fighting alongside us! But what do you want me to do? Tell him he's not ready? It'll break his heart! But the more experience he gets, the more he'll understand that this isn't the path for him!"

Unbeknownst to them, Humdrum had been outside with his earhole pressed to the door. The expression on his face was one of devastation.

So , he thought, *that's what they really think of me? That I'm a screw-up? That I'm not cut out for this? And Twilight, she's just been feeling sorry for me all this time?*

Narrowing his eyes in determination, he ran to the elevator and pressed on the button to the second floor, *his* floor. The floor contained two doors on either end of a small hallway. The one on the right led to his bedroom. He opened the one on the left to reveal an immense workshop, filled with piles of electrical junk.

"I'll show them," Humdrum said, taking off his belt and slapping it onto a worktable. "I'll show them all."

Picking up a screwdriver, he set to work.

"No, Pinkie," Applejack said into her cell as she carried groceries down the hall to her apartment. "We *can't* put pear upside-down cake on the menu!" Balancing her paper bags into one foreleg, she fumbled for the keys in her trench coat pocket. " *Because* there's a longstandin' feud between my family and the Pear family! Why?" Finding the key, she thrust it into the lock. "I don't know why, but there is!"

She groaned as she dropped the keys.

"Look, I gotta put these groceries away. I'll call ya back and we can discuss the menu further."

As she hung up, the door was opened by Fluttershy.

"Applejack!" she said, picking up the key from the floor. "I thought I heard you."

"Gimme a hoof with these?" Applejack asked, struggling to keep the bags up.

Fluttershy took one off her hooves. "I tried calling you, but your line was busy and—"

"Pinkie called," Applejack said as she moved past her. "Wanted to run menu ideas with me."

"Oh. Well, I didn't know what to do so I just told her to sit and wait for you—"

"Her who? What are ya talkin' abou—?"

She stopped in her tracks when she reached the kitchen. There, sitting at the table with a plate of cookies in front of her, was a small yellow filly with a bright red raincoat and an enormous pink bow in her red mane. Upon seeing her, Applejack dropped her groceries, making the filly's amber eyes look up. She smiled guiltily.

"H-Hiya, sis," she said in a tiny country voice.

Applejack blinked several times as she tried to process the sight in front of her. "Apple Bloom?"

"She just showed up at the door about twenty minutes ago," Fluttershy explained. "When I couldn't reach you, I couldn't just send her home so I told her to wait here and she got hungry so I gave her cookies and…"

She trailed off when she saw the shock in Applejack's eyes.

"I'll, just, um," Fluttershy said, backing away, "leave you two alone."

Ten minutes later, Apple Bloom was sitting on the couch, looking down guiltily at her hooves. Applejack hung up her cell phone and glared down at her little sister.

"Granny Smith is worried sick about ya!" Applejack exclaimed. "What were ya thinkin', sneakin' outta the house, stealin' Granny's credit card and takin' a bus up here all by yourself?! Do ya have any idea what kind of goons prowl these streets?! What are ya doin' up here anyway?!"

"I," Apple Bloom said in a small voice, "I wanted to see ya, sis."

Applejack sighed. "Ya could've called first, instead of scarin' the livin' daylights outta Big Mac and Granny Smith!" She put her hoof to her head. "First thing tomorrow, I'm takin' ya back to Appleloosa!"

"Ya mean…ya aren't happy to see me?"

Applejack's heart softened upon seeing a tear fall from her sister's eye.

"Oh, no, no, no, Apple Bloom." Sitting beside her, she put her hooves around her. "I'm *always* happy to see ya." She nuzzled her face into her little mane. "I've missed ya." She sighed. "Ya just gave me a scare, is all."

Apple Bloom looked up at her hopefully. "Does that you'll come home with me?"

Stunned, Applejack looked at her little sister. "What?"

"I've come to take ya home, big sis." She hung her head. "Or do ya not wanna be with us anymore?"

Applejack released her and stood up from the couch. "Ya know why I'm here. I came to find Longhorn."

"But ya've been here for almost a year now, and ya *still* haven't found him! I know, I've been watchin' the news. I know ya heard he was in Maretropolis, but maybe it was false information or…he's moved on?" Apple Bloom looked at the distressed expression on her

sister's face. "Maybe… *you* should move on too?"

Applejack shook her head. "I made a promise to Ma and Pa that I wouldn't rest until Longhorn was brought to justice."

"But no pony's seen him in ages! He could be dead for all we know! Can't ya just let it go?"

"I will *not* let it go!"

"But are ya sure this is what Ma and Pa would want?"

"What would *you* know?!" Applejack snapped, spinning around to face her. "Ya didn't know 'em like I did! You were too young to even remember 'em!"

Apple Bloom's eyes became glassy, causing Applejack to immediately regret her outburst.

"Sorry," the older sister said, taking a deep breath. "Maybe you're right. I've been here for ten months and nothin'. Maybe he isn't in Maretropolis after all."

Apple Bloom grinned. "So you'll come home?"

Applejack brushed her hoof against the ear containing her commlink. "A lot's changed since I left, Sugar Cube. I'm part of a team now."

"I know, but…do they really need ya? I mean Maretropolis will be fine with just five heroes, right? We need ya in Appleloosa."

Applejack cocked her head curiously. "Is crime a-brewin' again?"

"Well…no. Things have been quiet, actually."

The older mare shook her head. "Then Appleloosa doesn't need me."

" *We* need ya, Applejack," Apple Bloom said, taking her hoof. "Your family needs ya." She sniffed. " *I* need ya."

With a sigh, Applejack said, "It's not just the team, Apple Bloom. I've started a life here. My friend and I are gonna open that bakery I always talked about—"

"Can't ya start a bakery in Appleloosa?"

"We've already put the down payment on the buildin'."

"Your partner'll understand!" The filly curled her lip out. "Please, Applejack. I miss my big sis."

As she gazed into her little sister's big, baby doll eyes, Applejack wanted nothing more than to give her the answer she desired. However, there was so much going on right now. She couldn't just up and abandon the life she had built for herself in Maretropolis.

"Apple Bloom, I—"

" *Mare-velous!* " Twilight's voice said in her ear. " *Mare-velous! Turn on your TV to the news! Now!* "

"Applejack?" Apple Bloom asked, confused as to why her sister had suddenly become quiet.

"Hang on," Applejack said, grabbing the remote and sitting on the couch. "I have to check something."

She switched on the TV, which was already on the news channel.

" *The victims were rumored to have been members of the Moscowian mafia* ," the reporter said as an image of a bull in a business suit popped up onscreen. " *Kalmyk Korova and two bodyguards were found dead in his mansion. The maid who discovered the bodies claims they were impaled straight through by something very long and sharp…* "

Applejack's eyes widened at the description of the murder weapon. The image of two bull's horns flashed into her mind, charging straight for her.

" *Pa! Pa!"* a young filly's voice cried.

" *Applejack, look out!"* a mare's voice shouted.

Then there was a nasty *sploosh* , followed by a blood curdling scream.

"What's goin' on?" Apple Bloom asked.

Instead of answering her, Applejack pressed down on her commlink. "Twilight?"

" *You see it?* " Twilight's voice said.

The mare nodded. "Yeah."

" *I'm at the crime scene now. How soon can you get here?* "

"Immediately." She stood up. "Apple Bloom, stay here with Fluttershy. Lock the door and don't let no pony inside! Or no *bull* , for that matter!" She kneeled down to her. "Ya hear me? Don't let nobody in until I come back!"

"What do ya mean?" Apple Bloom asked, incredibly confused. "Where are ya goin'?"

Applejack stood up again. "I finally got the lead I've been waitin' for."

When Mistress Mare-velous arrived at the crime scene, the police were already there in the foyer, as was the Masked Matter-Horn.

"What do you know about the victim, Kalmyk Korova?" the alicorn asked as Mare-velous approached.

"Just that he's an alleged crime boss," Mare-velous said, looking around at the fancy marble room, "did some time for smugglin', only for his lawyers to get him out on an early release. He's been suspected of murder, though it was never proven."

The Matter-Horn smirked. "Some pony's been doing their homework."

"Not to group bulls together, but Longhorn has a fondness for his own kind. I always suspected they had a connection." She turned to the alicorn. "So…is it him?"

"You tell us," Chief Spitfire said, coming up to the heroes. "Coroner's about to take the bodies away. I suggest you take a look now before they're dissected."

"Do I have to see this?" Humdrum asked, peering out from behind the Matter-Horn's leg.

Mare-velous looked down at him with wide eyes, noticing him for the first time. Narrowing her eyes at the Matter-Horn, she threw her hoof around her neck and moved her face in close.

"What's he doin' here?" Mare-velous whispered harshly. "This ain't some robbery, this is a *murder* !"

"He insisted on coming," the Matter-Horn said, glancing at him. "And, um…thought you could use the emotional support."

Mare-velous peered over at him. He gave an awkward wave. Sighing, Mare-velous followed Chief Spitfire to the three body bags on the stretchers. The chief zipped one of them open and, taking a deep breath, the hero peered inside.

In the middle of the bull's chest was a huge, gaping hole. It wasn't a half-finished job. The weapon had gone straight through. Well, almost, as the nature of the wound seemed to suggest that the weapon had been curved, like a horn.

For a second, it wasn't a bull in the bag, but a yellow, burly stallion with red hair. Mare-velous shook the image out of her head.

"It's Longhorn," Mare-velous said in a small voice.

"You sure?" Chief Spitfire asked. "There are a lot of bulls with horns in this town. Could've been anything with horns, for that matter."

"It's him."

"How can you be sure?"

"Not many horns are long enough to go straight through a bull's body. Besides," Mare-velous said, clenching her hooves. "My parents had the exact same wounds when they were killed."

Nodding, Chief Spitfire zipped the bag closed. "Well, a DNA test should confirm it."

"What was the time of death?"

The chief shrugged. "Won't know for sure until the autopsy. Best we can estimate now is early this morning, not long before the maid called it in."

"Then he couldn't have gone far," Mistress Mare-velous murmured.

Her face filled with determination, she spun around and headed for the door.

"Mare-velous!" the Matter-Horn called, flying after her. "If you're thinking of going after Longhorn all by yourself—"

"I am!" she said, turning sharply towards the alicorn. "And don't even *think* of tryin' to stop me! This is *my* fight, Matter-Horn!"

"But Mare-velous," Humdrum said, running up to her, "this guy's dangerous! Didn't you see what he did to those bulls?"

"I know," Mare-velous said seriously. "Which is why I can't get any of y'all involved in this." Her hoof went to the rope hooked to her saddle. "I have to make sure he doesn't do a thing like this to any pony else again."

"But this is crazy! We're a team! We've got to stick toge—"

"We won't stop you, Mare-velous."

Humdrum turned to the Matter-Horn in shock. "What?"

"What?" Mare-velous said, equally surprised.

The Masked Matter-Horn stepped forward. "We are a team, and as members of your team, we respect your decision to want to take this

on your own. However, should you run into any difficulty," she tapped her ear, "we're only a call away."

Mistress Mare-velous stared at her for a long moment, wondering if she was serious. Then she smiled softly. "Thank you."

The Matter-Horn nodded in reply, and didn't protest when her teammate went out the door. Concerned, Humdrum caught the door before it could shut, and kept it open long enough for him to see Mare-velous reach into her ear and take her commlink out.

"You're not seriously letting her do this by herself, are you?" Humdrum demanded, letting the door close.

"She's perfectly capable of handling herself, Humdrum," the Matter-Horn said calmly. "After all, she was on her own long before she was part of the team."

"That doesn't mean she can't get hurt! You told me what happened to her parents! Her dad had Demeter's Lasso, and her mom was a skilled gunslinger and *they* couldn't take Longhorn!" He put his claws to his mouth. "W-What if she—?"

"Humdrum," the Matter-Horn said, laying a hoof on his shoulder, "this is something Mare-velous has to sort out on her own. I trust Mare-velous will be able to track down Longhorn. More importantly," she said with a sigh, "I trust she'll make the right decision."

Scrunching his snout, Humdrum asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on," she said, opening the door for them. "Our work here is done. We should get back to Sparkle Labs."

She crouched down for him to get on. Humdrum looked at her, and then looked out at the city where he saw Mare-velous swinging on her rope.

"You okay?" the Matter-Horn asked.

"Uh," Humdrum said, shaking his head. "Yeah, I just…" He fingered his belt. "I think I'll take a walk. That whole business made me, uh,

queasy."

She nodded. "Okay. Why don't you take the day off then? Call me when you want to come home."

He saluted. "I'll do that!"

He waved as she took to the skies. Once he was certain she was out of sight, Humdrum looked over at the skyscrapers. Mare-velous was no longer visible.

"This'll be the perfect opportunity to try out my new gadgets," he muttered to himself.

He touched the round green and gold buckle on his belt and detached it. On the back of the so-called buckle was a screen showing a map of Maretropolis and seven blinking dots, each a different color. He looked at the orange one representing Mare-velous, which was not too far from the green dot representing himself.

"Won't matter what you do with that commlink, Mare-velous," Humdrum said, smirking as he started walking down the marble steps, "because not even Twilight knows about the tracking devices in the suits."

And Trixie's villain-of-the-week parody...Glaciator from "Miraculous Ladybug!"

This arc's probably going to be shorter than the others.

Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 2

This is a real update, NOT an April Fools' joke, I swear!

Don't believe me? That's YOUR problem.

" *Go ahead, underestimate me.*

You won't be the first…

You won't be the last…

But you will be wrong."

- Steve Maraboli

Humdrum followed the blinking orange dot by renting a bike. Unfortunately, he couldn't pedal very fast, so by the time Mistress Mare-velous finally stopped, he was miles away from her destination. Panting heavily, he came up to a tiny shop called The Flim Flam Brothers' Everything Under the Sun Emporium. Through the wide glass window, he could see Mare-velous talking to two tall unicorn stallions in straw hats and striped vests. They appeared to be twins, aside from one having a red mustache.

"What's Mare-velous doing at a pawn shop?" Humdrum wondered aloud.

He parked his bike in the alley next-door and then peered carefully in through the front window. He couldn't hear a word of the conversation, but Mare-velous appeared to be shouting angrily about something. The mustache-less brother held up a silver horseshoe, which she knocked out of his hoof. The other brother showed her a golden whistle, which she also refused.

Suddenly, Demeter's Lasso whipped off Mare-velous' saddle and

wrapped around the two clerks, who looked truly terrified.

What's she doing? Humdrum thought, his eyes widening at the sight. *Mare-velous* never *uses her rope on civilians!*

He watched in horror as the rope tightened around the twins and their mouths opened, as if to cry out. Humdrum wished he could read lips as they said something to Mare-velous, eventually convincing her to release her hold on them. The stallions gasped for breath on the floor as she turned to leave.

Gasping, Humdrum ducked below the window and skittered into the alley where his bike lay. Peering around the corner, he watched Mare-velous leave the shop and then use her rope to swing away.

He could track her down later, but first, he needed to know what that little scene had been about.

A bell dinged above him as he entered the stop. The stallions were standing now, smoothing out their vests. Upon hearing the bell, however, they turned to the door, straightened up and put on big grins as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Well lookie here, oh brother of mine, what luck!" the mustache-less brother said. " *Two* superhero customers in one day!"

"In one *hour* ," the mustache brother said.

"Welcome, Mister Humdrum, to the Flim Flam Brothers' Everything Under the Sun Emporium! I'm Flim and he's Flam!"

"Nice to meet you," Humdrum said, waving his claw dismissively. "Would you guys mind telling me—?"

"You know what every powerless superhero needs?" Flam said, zipping to the dragon's side and holding up a cell phone. "Proper equipment!"

"Or perhaps a new cape?" Flim said, presenting a large blue cape. "We've got blue," with a wave of his hoof, the cape changed color, "purple, indigo, vermillion, chartreuse…"

"This toaster can electrocute your enemies!" Flam showed him a beat-up toaster, which was overrun with loose wires. "Provided your enemies are in a tub of water, of course."

"…goldenrod, eggshell, maroon…"

"I'll stick with the cape I've got," Humdrum said, holding up his own cape proudly.

"You'd like a new mask then!" Flim started holding up different-color masks in front of his face. "We've got blue, purple, indigo…"

Flam showed him a gun. "Something to fend off your enemies with!"

"Whoa, whoa!" Humdrum said, holding up his claws. "I don't have a license for—"

Flam fired it at the wall. Instead of a bullet, out came a suction cup.

"No license needed," he said, waving the toy. "Perfectly legal. Doesn't do as much damage as the real deal though, but won't get you in trouble with the law."

"Neither does the real deal," Flim said with a snicker.

"I'm not here to buy anything!" Humdrum said, pushing himself between them. "I just want you to tell me what Mistress Mare-velous was doing here."

The brothers looked at each other incredulously.

"Why not ask her yourself?" Flim asked.

"Aren't the two of you on the same team?" Flam asked.

"That's not important right now," Humdrum said, placing his claws on his hips. "I saw that she used Demeter's Lasso on you. Tell me whatever you told her."

The stallions laughed.

"And why should we?" Flam asked.

"Even if we knew what you were talking about…" Flam said.

"…you wouldn't know if we're telling the truth."

"Mistress Mare-velous is at least…"

"…persuasive."

"However…"

Flim brought back the capes. "If you were to make a purchase…"

Flam showed the dragon a toy bow with a suction cup for an arrow. "…it might just refresh our memories."

Humdrum glared at the stallions. They already gave off the vibe that they were con artists. Even if they managed *not* to rip him off, there was still no guarantee that they would give him the information they wanted, or that they'd even be truthful. Humdrum stepped away from them and searched the room, pretending to browse as he tried to come up with an idea.

Then his eyes fell on the glass case beneath the cash register. Several pieces of jewelry were on display. The price tags and the sign *100% Genuine* suggested they were expensive.

Grinning, Humdrum turned back to the brothers. "How about this? You tell me what you told Mare-velous," he said, tapping the display case, "and I won't go telling the police you're trying to pass off fake gems for real ones."

That wiped the smiles off the brothers' faces.

"W-What do you mean?" Flim asked nervously.

"Those jewels are one hundred percent genuine!" Flam insisted.

"Dudes," Humdrum said, crossing his arms, "I'm a dragon. I literally eat these things for breakfast. You think I can't tell a real gem apart from a fake one?" He pointed to the jewelry. "Those are obviously pieces of colored glass, worth *way* less than a thousand dollars."

The brothers looked at each other and then grinned down at the dragon.

"What was it you wanted to know, again?" Flim asked.

He smirked. "Mare-velous wanted info out of you. What was that info exactly?"

"Just asking for the whereabouts of Longhorn, as usual," Flim replied.

"You'd think she would've stopped asking us by now," Flam said.

"But *no* ! Just our luck that the one time we *finally* get a visit from Longhorn, that truth-seeking vigilante comes around the next day!"

"So Longhorn *was* here," Humdrum said. "How do you boys know him?"

"Just business," Flam said, holding up his hooves defensively.

"Back in the day, we were his top suppliers," Flim said.

"Before he went underground, that is."

"We hadn't heard from him in years until last night when he showed up in our shop after hours, demanding that he purchase a Strawberry Patch Foal."

Humdrum blinked. "A…Strawberry Patch Foal? You mean those little foal dolls dressed like fruit?"

"The rarest one!" Flam said.

"The Pineapple Princess!" Flim said.

The dragon cocked his head. "Not judging or anything, but Longhorn didn't strike me as the toy collecting type."

Flim shrugged. "We never question our customers' tastes."

"Business is business," Flam said.

"O…kay." Humdrum shook his head. "So where's Longhorn now?"

"Heck if we know!" Flim exclaimed. "He didn't exactly leave a return address when he pointed those sharp horns at our necks!"

"And made us sell that doll for half the price!" Flam said huffily.

"But we told Mare-velous where she *might* find him."

"Where?" Humdrum asked eagerly.

The brothers glanced at each other and winked.

"It's not exactly a place for kids," Flim said.

Humdrum pointed to the wall. "Is that jeweled dagger embedded with plastic?"

"But," Flam said quickly, "if you had a fake ID…"

"And ditched the cape and mask…" Flim continued.

"I get it," Humdrum said with a nod. "Not a place for heroes either."

The twins shook their heads.

"There's a place where lowlifes such as Longhorn and his gang like to dwell," Flim said.

"Not that we go there often," Flam said, looking around to see if anyone else was listening.

"It's called The Unstable Stable."

"You can find it on Ivy Road."

"Password's 'no horn matters here.'"

The thought of just what sort of lowlifes would be at this hangout sent chills up the dragon's spine, but he tried to swallow it all in a gulp. "Okay. Thanks."

He attempted to leave when the twins stepped in his path.

"If you want," Flam said, "we can sell you a disguise for tonight."

"For half the price?" Flim said, putting a fake mustache to his upper lip.

"When's AJ comin' back?" Apple Bloom asked as she sat on the couch, petting Winona.

"I'm sure she'll be here soon," Fluttershy said, placing a plate of cucumber sandwiches on the coffee table.

"Can't ya at least take me to the park or somethin'? I'm bored!"

"Now, now. Remember what Applejack said. We need to stay in this apartment until she comes back."

Apple Bloom sighed. "I may be young, but I wasn't born yesterday, ya know? She's gone after Longhorn again, hasn't she?"

Fluttershy said nothing. Before Applejack had left, she had told her to keep Apple Bloom safe, as Applejack was afraid Longhorn might come after her little sister. Fluttershy didn't want to scare the poor thing, but she hated lying to her too.

Just then, a knock came at the door, making Fluttershy jump. Apple Bloom gripped her hooves around Winona's neck. Applejack had told them not to open the door to any pony.

"Wait here," Fluttershy whispered as she slowly approached the door.

Peering through the peephole, she discovered Delancey making funny faces. Sighing in relief, she started unhitching the door.

"What are ya doin'?" Apple Bloom asked.

"It's alright," Fluttershy said. "We can trust him."

As she opened the door, Delancey held out a bouquet of assorted flowers. "For you, my lady."

"Delancey!" Fluttershy said, taking the flowers gleefully. "What a delightful surprise!"

Delancey frowned. "You don't remember? It's Saturday?"

Fluttershy blinked a few times and then gasped. "Our picnic!" She put her hoof to her head. "Sweet Celestia, I forgot! I'm so sorry, Delancey, but I promised my roommate I'd watch her little sister until she comes back. Think we can reschedule?"

"Who's at the door, Fluttershy?" Apple Bloom called, trying to get a look at the stallion.

Fluttershy grinned brightly as an idea occurred to her. "You can stay for lunch though and we can watch Apple Bloom together! I'm sure Applejack won't mind."

Delancey peered past her at the filly on the couch. "Oh, well, uh… I'm not really one for—"

"I made cucumber sandwiches!" Fluttershy said musically.

One look into her big, begging eyes and he was putty in her hooves. "Well, if you cut off the crusts—"

Fluttershy squealed as she pulled him inside then securely relocked the door.

"Apple Bloom," Fluttershy said, gesturing to the stallion, "this is Delancey. He's a, uh…" She paused to blush. "…f-friend of mine."

Apple Bloom glanced at the flowers in Fluttershy's hoof and smirked. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"What?!" Fluttershy squeaked, hiding her red face behind the bouquet. "N-No, I…well, we never said that…we're not…"

"We spend a great deal of time together," Delancey said, glancing sideways at her, "though I wouldn't object to putting a label on it, if Fluttershy's willing."

Fluttershy lowered the flowers to look at him, meeting his admiring

gaze. With a small smile, she glanced back down at the bouquet.

"Well, uh…" She spoke quickly. "I guess he's my boyfriend then."

Embarrassed, she rushed into the kitchen to find a vase. Chuckling, Delancey sat down on the couch. Then he remembered the filly was sitting there too and suddenly became very nervous. He hadn't much experience with foals. Last foal he really connected with grew up to be his heart's desire, so that wasn't really helpful, not to mention he'd been petrified the entire time.

"So, uh…" Delancey rubbed the back of his neck. "Do foals like… magic tricks?"

"Depends," Apple Bloom said, laying her forelegs across Winona's back as she leaned forward. "Are they any good?"

Delancey crossed his hooves. "Are they any good?" Appalled, he put one hoof to his chest. "My dear little pony, you are looking at the master of chao—err, magic!"

He placed his hooves together, and when he pulled them apart, a deck of cards suddenly appeared between them. He creatively shuffled them several times before fanning them out to the filly.

"Pick a card," he said.

Apple Bloom looked at him incredulously. "Seriously?"

"Just pick one, smart aleck."

Rolling her eyes, she picked a card: the six of spades. She placed it back in the deck and watched the stallion shuffle it a few more times.

"Oh, look!" Delancey said, picking out a card. "The three of hearts!"

"Nice try," Apple Bloom said boringly. "But my card was—"

"Six of spades, I know."

She blinked. "Err, yeah. But why didn't ya just pick that one out of

the deck?"

"That's because it's not *in* the deck, anymore," Delancey said, fanning out the cards for her to see. "You are now wearing it as a bow."

Confused, Apple Bloom placed her hoof to the bow on her head. Delancey summoned a hoof mirror so she could see that her bow now had the pattern of the six of spades, making her gasp.

"That's the most amazin' thing I've ever seen!"

Delancey smirked. "Didn't Fluttershy tell you I was amazing?"

"I didn't even see ya use your horn!"

"That's how amazing I am," he said, slicking his mane back.

When Fluttershy returned with three cups of tea on a tray, she found Apple Bloom laughing as Delancey juggled five apples. At least, they *were* apples until they returned to his hooves. Then they were oranges, turning back into apples as they went tossed into the air. With a smile, Fluttershy set the tray down on the coffee table.

"Fluttershy, your boyfriend is *hilarious* !" Apple Bloom said, leaning towards her. "He's a keeper."

Blushing, Fluttershy said, "Delancey, may I talk with you in the kitchen a moment?"

"Certainly, my dear," he said, making the apples/oranges disappear.

As they headed for the kitchen, Apple Bloom called, "If y'all are gonna do what I think you're gonna do, I'll tell Applejack ya did it all over her kitchen counter with her little sister in the next room!"

Fluttershy winced as her face became even redder. Delancey only chuckled.

"Kids really *do* say the darnest things, don't they?"

Shaking off her embarrassment, Fluttershy closed the kitchen door.

"You're really wonderful with children."

Delancey frowned in surprise. "I am?"

She nodded. "I'm not supposed to have her leave this apartment until her sister comes back, so it's nice that you're here to entertain her."

"Her sister won't let her leave this apartment?" He cocked his eyebrow. "Overprotective much?"

"She has a good reason. You see…" She glanced around and leaned towards him to whisper. "When Applejack was a foal and Apple Bloom was just a baby, their parents were…k-k-killed…by a dangerous criminal."

Delancey's eyes widened as he looked at the door. "Does she know?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "And the criminal's…in town. Applejack's worried he'll come for Apple Bloom, which is why she doesn't want her leaving this apartment, and why I have to make sure she's safe." She took his hoof. "But I'm not sure I can do this alone."

He looked down at her hoof and then at her. He certainly didn't want a dangerous criminal coming in here to harm her or the filly. Delancey may have done equal harm to children in the past, but it had never been intentional. The thought that someone would want to deliberately harm a filly, most notably the mare he adored, made him sick to his stomach.

With determination, he replied, "You won't be alone. I'll be here to protect you."

Grinning, Fluttershy hugged him, causing Delancey to smile widely in bliss.

"It's awfully quiet in there!" Apple Bloom called, knocking on the door. "Ya sure y'all aren't doin' it?"

Fluttershy was about to faint from embarrassment while Delancey laughed in amusement.

"I think I'm going to like her," he said.

Once evening fell, Spike trudged carefully down a shady part of town. He kept his brown trench coat close to his body and the brim of his gray fedora over his eyes, which made it hard for him to see through his fake glasses. As he approached a hanging sign that read *The Unstable Stable* , he touched the false mustache on his lip, hoping it looked convincing enough.

Taking a deep breath, he walked down a set of stairs and knocked on the steel door at the bottom landing. A peephole slid open and a pair of red eyes glared down at him.

"Password?" a gruff voice asked.

Standing on his tippy toes, Spike whispered, "No horn matters here."

The eyes narrowed. "We don't serve minors."

"When you say 'minors,' do you mean underage creatures," Spike said, glancing around as he reached into his trench coat, "or do you mean *miners* who mine for little beauties such as these?"

He pulled out what looked like a glimmering ruby. After a few seconds of silence, the peephole slid shut and the door opened. Spike took a step back as he was met with a creature with a gorilla's head and a minotaur's body.

With the figure towering over him, Spike wasn't in the mood to ask questions.

After a quick look around, the bouncer snatched the ruby and tucked it into the pocket of his khaki pants. Then he stepped aside and let the dragon through. As Spike gave a nod of thanks, he smiled to himself. *Guess those fake jewels were of some value after all.*

His moment of triumph was short-lived, when a plate whizzed over his head and hit the door behind him.

He'd entered some sort of pub, filled with ponies and creatures of all

sorts throwing furniture, engaging in wrestling matches, gambling with cards, and drinking hard. Several of the thugs Spike recognized from wanted posters.

A few of them, he knew personally.

"So there I was," the Mane-iac said, sitting at a round table in the center of the room, "in a room full of petrified billionaires and business ponies, with Radiance in my clutches…"

Spike lowered the brim of his hat further as he attempted to walk past the table.

"…when suddenly, what should happen?" She used her mane locks to take a big swig of her beer. "This stumpy little dragon sprays my mane with a hose! A *hose* !" She gestured to her mane. "Took down *this* !"

"You think *you've* got problems," Trixie said, slamming down her glass. Spike was quite surprised to see her out of jail so soon. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has turned every pony in this city into dogs *and* ice cream, only to be foiled by the Power Ponies time and time again! Once with a gem cart!"

"Gems?" Spot said, coming out of his nap.

"Our heist last week should've been flawless!" Rover exclaimed, conking his colleague back to unconsciousness. "If that meddling Mistress Mare-velous and her meddling minions hadn't…meddled!"

"Oh, whine, whine, whine."

Spike stiffened at the sound of that voice. He looked to see the Phoenix using her magic to throw darts at a picture of the Masked Matter-Horn pinned to a dartboard.

"You fools don't know what real misery is," the Phoenix said, hovering one dart beside her as she aimed, "until you've spent ten years wallowing in prison," she fired and struck the Matter-Horn square in the eye, making Spike flinch, "pining over one pathetic pony," she threw another dart, hitting the image's muzzle, "and you strive to get her attention through impressive, magical acts of

thievery," the next dart hit the neck, "only for her to beat you in the most intellectual," she threw another, "touchy," and another, "feely," and another, "way," and another, "possible!"

The last dart was thrown with such force, it split one of the others in two. Gulping, Spike ducked his head and scurried in between the Phoenix and the table of previously defeated foes.

"So if you had used that dog head thing on us," Fido asked Trixie, pointing to himself, "would that have turned us into ponies?"

I gotta find Mare-velous , Spike thought, looking anxiously around the bar, *before these guys recognize me!*

Then, like an answer from above, a familiar country voice reached the dragon's earholes. "Listen here, Buffalo Bull, my patience is wearin' thin!"

Spike looked over to a booth in the corner, where a green-eyed mare in a black ski mask and turtleneck was on the table, her hooves gripped to the chest of a black bull with a patch of white around his eye. Seated next to him was a shorter, tan bull with a bandana over his face. Both bulls looked positively terrified.

"Ya either know where your boss is, or ya don't!" the mare shouted, glaring hard at her hostage.

"I swear!" the hostage, Buffalo Bull said, holding his hooves up. "I don't know nothin'!"

He yelped as she tossed him aside and turned to the other bull. "Then maybe your buddy Doc Holstein here's got a clearer memory."

She grabbed the bull with the bandana and hoisted him up.

"Whoa, whoa!" Doc screamed, flailing about. "Take it easy, lady!"

Spike had no doubt of the identity of this mare, and was mortified to see her interrogating in such a harsh manner. Then he spotted a burlap sack near Buffalo Bull's hooves. Curious, he crept toward the booth, keeping his eyes on the sack.

"Don't think I don't remember y'all!" she said, bringing his face to hers. "Y'all are real tight with King Longhorn, and I *know* he's set up shop in this here town!"

Crouching down, Spike slowly opened up the sack and peered inside.

"So tell me again," Mare-velous said, tightening her grip on Doc's chest. "Where is he?"

"Tiny sparkly dresses?!" Spike exclaimed once he discovered the contents of the bag.

The bulls and Mare-velous turned to him, the latter gasping.

"What in the hay?"

Looking up at her, Spike smiled nervously. "H-Hi?"

Grabbing him by the collar, she hoisted him up to her face. "What are ya doin' here?! How'd ya even get in here?!"

"Sorry, Mare-velous!" Spike said, putting up his claws. "I know you didn't want any help but—"

"Mare-velous?" Rover's raspy voice cried out.

The two heroes looked over to see the gray Diamond Dog staring right at them, growling.

"It *is* her!" he exclaimed, pointing. "I'd know those eyes anywhere! It's Mistress Mare-velous!"

The Mane-iac stood up from her seat. "And the Power Ponies' annoying little dragon sidekick! Humdrum!"

Now all eyes were on the disguised heroes. Mare-velous glared sideways at the dragon, who laughed awkwardly.

"Oops?"

"Get them!" Trixie shouted.

As the thugs charged towards them, Mare-velous sighed as she psychically got out her rope. "So much for the disguise." She lifted Spike onto her back. "Hang on tight."

"This is for taking away our gems!" Rover shouted as he and his two colleagues closed in.

"They must suffer for foiling Trixie's plans!" Trixie said, powering her horn.

"That little runt will pay for ruining my mane!" the Mane-iac cried, cracking her locks.

"Shouting is fun!" some pony yelled.

When the criminals were inches from the heroes, Mare-velous grabbed her rope and jumped off the table. Spike cried out as they swung above the angry mob, watching as they collided into each other in an attempt to grab the heroes.

The only one who hadn't joined in the fight was the Phoenix, who kept close to the dartboard. Glancing around, she illuminated her horn and opened the front door. Once the heroes were through, she shut it and whistled as if nothing had happened.

Landing on her hooves, Mare-velous mentally tucked her rope into her coat as she ran up the steps and down the street. Spike could hear the door to the pub slamming open and the mob screaming after them.

Ducking into an alleyway, Mare-velous kicked a dumpster open. Spike kept his grip around her neck as she jumped inside and slammed the lid over them. Spike gagged at the terrible smell of garbage, only for Mare-velous to place one hoof in his mouth and the other to her lips.

They waited until the sound of the mob had faded into the distance. Cautiously, Mare-velous opened the lid a smidge and glanced around.

"Coast is clear," she said, opening the dumpster further.

Spike heaved a sigh of relief as she helped him out. "Boy, that was a close one! We sure showed them, didn't we?"

His relief was terminated as soon as Mare-velous gripped his shoulders and forced him to look into her furious glare.

"What were ya *thinkin'* ?!" she demanded. "Do ya have any idea how dangerous that place is?!"

"Uh, yeah, kinda," Spike said, pointing with his thumb towards the street. "We *were* just chased by a mob of our greatest enemies."

Groaning, she released him. "Matter-Horn asked ya to follow me, didn't she? I *told* her I wanted to handle this alone! And to send *you* of all people—"

"Matter-Horn doesn't know about this!" Spike insisted, holding up his claws. "This was all my idea!"

She smacked herself in the forehead. "Now that's even *stupider* ! Not only could you've gotten hurt, but ya blew my cover when I was this close to findin' Longhorn's hideout! And now that those crooks know that we're onto 'em they'll be movin' their little bad guy hangout someplace else!"

"Longhorn's hangout or the pub?"

"Both!"

The dragon sighed in shame. "Yeah, you're right. Too bad you couldn't get any information from those henchbulls." Reaching into his coat, he pulled out his tracking screen. "Guess there's nothing left for us to do but follow the tracking device I put on them."

"Exact—" She blinked. "What?"

Smirking, Spike held up the screen. "I figured even if you got them to talk, they wouldn't be very honest, so as I was looking through their bag I slipped in a tracking device. Now that you've got them all scared, they're sure to run right back to their boss."

Mare-velous' mouth fell open as she stared at the blinking red dot on

the screen, then at the dragon. "That's…brilliant."

He lifted his chin proudly. "I have my moments."

"That'll definitely make it easier to track Longhorn down!"

She reached for the device, but he pulled it away, shaking his head.

"My tech, my rules." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're not doing this without me. And before you send me home, remember that I am underage and that it would be dangerous for me to walk these streets so late at night, especially considering there's an angry mob of villains after my head. Of course, you could just take me home yourself, but that just might give those henchbulls more time to warn their boss that you're looking for him. Or, perhaps, they might discover the tracking device before we catch up and by the time you get to their most recent location, it'll be too late."

He waved the device tauntingly. "Just saying, it would save you a *heck* of a lot more time if I came with you."

Mare-velous stared at him in disbelief for a long while. Then, sighing in defeat, she took off her ski mask, revealing her hero mask and releasing her long ponytail.

"When did ya get so smooth-talkin'?" she asked, removing her trench coat.

Spike shrugged. "There's a lot of things you don't know about me."

References to: "Brandy and Mr. Whiskers" (guilty pleasure of mine as a kid), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and some *Batman* and *Scooby-Doo* . Who can spot them?

There will be one more chapter. Like I said, this arc isn't very long.

Longhorn's Journey Into Night: Part 3

So eager to get this arc done, I wrote this whole chapter in one day!

" *The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury."*

- Marcus Aurelius

With both of them back in their superhero costumes, Humdrum hung tight to Mare-velous as she swung from rooftop to rooftop.

"Where to now?" she asked, landing on her hooves to catch her breath.

Humdrum looked down at the tracking device. "Looks like they've stopped moving. They're on Bovine Boulevard, just five blocks down from here."

Nodding, Mare-velous got her rope ready.

"Hey, AJ?" Humdrum asked. "I've been wondering. Why did Longhorn come to Maretropolis in the first place?"

With a shrug, she held onto her rope. "Who knows?" Grunting, she swung to the next building. "As far back as I can remember, Longhorn only does anything for two reasons: money and power."

Humdrum gripped her neck tighter as they went to the next building.

"But he's pretty good at workin' his way around the law," Mare-velous said, steadying the weight on her back. "Back in Appleloosa, he had his goons destroy our crop so that we'd be so desperate for money we'd sell him our land."

"So he'd have it legally," Humdrum concluded.

Nodding, she jumped up to swing again. "He changed his plans once he caught sight of this here rope."

"Still," Humdrum said as she continued to carry him, "Maretropolis is a big change from Appleloosa. And it seems strange he'd murder a mob boss who could've been a powerful ally."

Mare-velous stopped to pant a moment. "Maybe *too* powerful. Longhorn probably wanted to gain control of Korova's operation."

"Maybe." Then another thought occurred to him. "But what about that Strawberry Patch Doll?"

"What?" she said, looking back at him.

"Flim and Flam told me he bought a rare Strawberry Patch Doll just yesterday, for half the price."

Mare-velous prepared to swing again. "If it's rare, he probably wants to sell it."

"Then why not just steal it?"

"Like I said." She jumped. "He buys it legally, though cheap, he doesn't get in trouble with the law."

They landed on a rooftop on Bovine Boulevard.

"And the dresses in the henchbulls' bag?" Humdrum asked. "I mean I know some guys are into dresses, but they were a bit too small for a bull. They looked like they might fit a foal."

"So he's smugglin' dresses or something!" Mare-velous groaned impatiently. "I don't know! I just know that whatever he's up to, it ain't good!"

Humdrum pointed to the building across the street. "The tracker leads there, in the abandoned milk factory."

Mare-velous rolled her eyes. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

They approached the edge of the building they stood on so they

could look out at the rundown milk factory.

"So what's our next move?" Humdrum asked.

" *My* next move," Mare-velous said, tightening her rope in her hooves, "is that I go in there and find Longhorn."

He looked up at her in disbelief. "You're not going in there alone?"

"It's better this way. You could get hurt."

"Uh-uh!" Narrowing his eyes, he crossed his arms. "You are *not* pulling that excuse on me again! I tracked you to the pawn shop, got information from Flim and Flam, and pinned that tracking device on the henchbulls which led us to Longhorn's hideout, all *without* any super powers! So do *not* say I can't handle this kind of work, that I'm a screw-up, that I'd just be getting in everyone's way—"

"That's *not* what this is about, Spike," Mare-velous muttered without making eye contact.

"Then *why* ?! Why don't you trust me to help you?!"

"Because I can't lose ya!"

Humdrum stepped back at her sudden outburst. With a sigh, Mare-velous knelt down and laid a hoof on his shoulder.

"Listen," she said slowly, her voice cracking. "My pa died tryin' to save my ma, and ma died tryin' to save me." She locked eyes with him. "If…if I were to lose someone else I cared about…"

She trailed off, and then shut her eyes as small tears began to fall. "That's why I shut everyone out, Spike, why I was hesitant to join the team in the first place. I…I start to care…and people get hurt."

She hung her head. "I can't let that monster hurt anyone else important to me. Not my sister, not the team," she said, opening her eyes, "not you."

Humdrum was quiet, moved by this declaration, unsure of how to respond.

Inhaling sharply, Mare-velous stood up. "If ya wanna be helpful, then keep a lookout. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, call Twilight and the police."

He looked up at her worriedly. "And…if something happens to you?"

"Don't worry." Glancing down at the rope in her hooves, she said, "I won't chicken out this time."

Following her gaze, he wondered what she meant by that.

"But," she said, gripping tighter to her rope, "if…something *does* happen to me…tell my sister I love her." She turned away from him. "And that I'm sorry."

She telepathically raised one end of the rope and swung off the building.

"AJ, wait!" Humdrum called out, stretching his claw towards her.

But he was too late to stop her. He watched anxiously as she floated downward, landed on an open windowsill and disappeared into the factory. Sighing sadly, Humdrum sat down.

"She's right," he said, placing his face in his claws. "I shouldn't have followed her. She didn't want my help. I should've left her alone. She had the henchbulls, she would've found this place just fine with or without me." He shut his eyes. "I'm nothing but a bother."

"Sometimes bothers are needed."

Jumping at the sudden female voice, Humdrum spun around. A green earth mare in overalls was watering a row of potted plants. Her brown mane was braided and tucked inside an orange kerchief. The dragon stared at the mare and the potted plants, swearing that neither of them had been there a few seconds ago.

"Who the…?" he said, scratching his head. "What…when…where'd you come from?"

The mare smiled and looked at him with her chestnut brown eyes. "Well you see, when a male titan and a female titan love each other

very much…"

Even more confused, Humdrum scrunched his nose. "Who are you?"

Giggling, the mare set down her watering can and wiped her hooves off her overalls. "Your friend Applejack knows me well." She placed her hooves proudly on her hips. "You could say I'm like a second mother to her."

Humdrum scrutinized her and then the plants. Then his eyes widened as he reached a conclusion.

"Are you," he asked, taking a nervous step back, "Demeter?"

The mare grinned further. "You *are* a clever boy."

The dragon self-consciously dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "F-Forgive me, your highness. I didn't know!"

Demeter held up her hoof as she approached. "I didn't expect you to. After all, we've never formally met. Not to mention the sculptors and illustrators of the world can't seem to agree on my appearance."

"Applejack's not here. She's over—"

"I'm not here to see Applejack." Bending down, she gently lifted his chin. "I'm here to see you."

He blinked. "Me?"

"Yes, Spike," Demeter said, her face becoming serious. "I'm here to warn you that you must stop Applejack from doing this heinous deed."

"What do you mean?" Humdrum asked, straightening up. "She wants to stop Longhorn and bring him to justice."

She shook her head. "The only justice she wishes upon him is the justice of the Underworld."

"But that would mean…" Looking downward, he gasped. "She

wouldn't!"

"I'm afraid so. Since Applejack lost her parents and became my Vassal, her one thought has been to personally see to King Longhorn's demise." Demeter sighed. "I had hoped steering her towards a nobler cause would divert her from this dark path. Unfortunately, her hatred for Longhorn has festered over the years. Even after all her heroic deeds, she will choose vengeance over justice.

"Spike," she said, laying a hoof on his shoulder, "if Applejack kills Longhorn, there will be no turning back for her. She will forfeit her role as my Vassal, and the act of murder will darken her soul forever."

His eyes widened. "She won't be able to wield your Lasso anymore?"

Demeter shook her head. "My Lasso can only be used for good, not evil. I've told her this many times, but she will not listen to me. You must stop her before it's too late."

"But if she won't listen to *you* ," Humdrum said, holding out his claws, "what makes you think she'll listen to *me* ? I mean you're her mentor! I'm just a sidekick!"

Demeter smiled. "Applejack cares for you, Spike, in a way much deeper than she expresses. It's deeper than anything platonic or familial or even romantic. You touch her heart in a way no one else can."

"How can that be?" Humdrum asked. "I mean she hardly even knows me! I hardly even know *her* , for that matter. What can be deeper than friendship or family or romance?!"

"Compassion," she whispered. "That's why you followed her, isn't it? That's why she protects you in battle. You see something in each other that makes you both compassionate. It is this compassion which will save Applejack from this fate."

Humdrum was still in disbelief, but there was some sense in the

goddess' words. Something compelled him to help Applejack. He'd been racking his brain to figure out what. Was it the fact that they were both orphans? Was it his respect for her as a hero and teammate?

"Sometimes," Demeter said, seeming to read his thoughts, "you don't need a reason to care for someone."

It didn't take long after that statement for him to realize that she was right. It didn't matter why Humdrum wanted to help Mistress Mare-velous. He cared, and that's all that mattered.

And he most *certainly* didn't want her to become a murderer.

"I won't let her!" Humdrum exclaimed, turning toward the factory. "I won't let her do it!"

"I know you won't," Demeter said.

When he turned around to thank her, the goddess and the potted plants were gone.

Determined, Humdrum fiddled with his belt, searching for the button that would launch his grappling hook. Then the Matter-Horn's voice broke through his eardrums.

" *Mistress Mare-velous! Mistress Mare-velous! Do you read me?* "

Humdrum waited for Mare-velous to answer and then remembered that she had taken her commlink out.

" *Humdrum?* " the Matter-Horn's voice asked. " *Can you pass this information onto Mare-velous?* "

He stiffened and looked around, wondering if the alicorn was watching.

" *I know you followed her, Spike.* " She sounded distraught. " *I traced your commlink at Headquarters. There's no use denying it.* "

Laughing nervously, he pressed down on his commlink. "For the record, I've been *very* helpful this whole case."

" *We'll talk about this later. The police just gave me some very interesting information about Korova's murder. I don't know how this connects to Longhorn, but there's a chance Korova might have had a child staying with him.* "

Humdrum raised an eyebrow. "A child?"

" *When the police searched his home, they found a door which had been recently broken down. Its room had a small bed and was littered in old candy wrappers, toys and small clothing. Judging by the expiration dates on some of the candy wrappers, the police think the room's occupant had been there for quite some time, months at least.* "

"Did Korova have any children?" Humdrum asked.

" *Yes, but they're all grown, and whoever was kept in that room had been there recently. I've tried running some DNA samples, but so far the computer hasn't brought up any useful information, other than it belongs to a cow.* "

"Which doesn't help because we're dealing with a whole herd of cows! I mean aside from Korova and Longhorn, there's their henchbulls and…"

He stopped. Then he remembered the doll, and the dresses fit for a child. Adding the information from the Matter-Horn, the pieces were finally coming together.

"Holy Demeter, it all makes sense!" Humdrum exclaimed.

" *Spike? What is it?* "

"No time! Get the police to the abandoned milk factory! I gotta stop Mare-velous before she stops Longhorn!"

Why in the world did that stubborn little dragon have to follow me? Mare-velous thought as she crawled through the air duct. *Doesn't he know he can get hurt? Why couldn't he just leave me alone?*

She paused a moment to sigh. *Kind of like Apple Bloom, going off on his own because he cares.* She kept moving. *Why* does *he care? I've been nothing but cold to him all this time.* She shook her head. *Not important now, old girl. You can't let yourself get distracted again.*

As she continued through the air duct, she could hear her father crying out in pain.

" *Pa! Pa!* " she had cried, running out to his freshly impaled corpse.

She could hear the huffs of a bull, coming closer.

" *Applejack,* " her mother had cried, " *look out!* "

Her mother had pushed her out of the way, then came the *sploosh* and the bloodcurdling scream. By the time young Applejack had turned around, Longhorn was pulling his horn out of her mother's chest.

She remembered crying, her vision of the corpses blurred by her tears. Their eyes had still been open in shock. She had flung herself over her parents, urging them to get up.

But they would never rise again.

" *Finally* ," Longhorn had said, picking Demeter's Lasso up from beside her father's body. " *The magic rope is mine* ." Applejack remembered how he had flung it about. " *How do ya get this dang thing to work?* "

She recalled her fury, how she had glared at him, fuming. How she had wanted to strangle him at that moment for what he had done to the two ponies she cared for the most.

Then the rope had come to life, looping itself around Longhorn's neck. Applejack hadn't questioned it then, for Pa had told her how Demeter's Lasso chose its owner. She had just sat there, urging the cord to tighten. Even now, Longhorn's gasps for air were still etched in her brain.

" *Applejack!* " the sheriff had called. " *Stop it! You're killin' him!* "

The sheriff's voice had startled her enough to break her concentration. The rope had loosened and fallen limp to the ground. Longhorn hadn't wasted any time to break into a run.

I should've let the rope finish him then , Mare-velous thought as she approached a patch of light up ahead. *I won't make the same mistake twice.*

Hearing voices, she slowed her pace and peered through the grate below her. She found some sort of boardroom containing a long table and two rows of cushioned chairs which were so old, there were bits of fluff and springs sticking out of them. Two bulls were playing a card game in the middle of the table. At the table's head sat the largest bull of the bunch.

His coat was dark gray, black sideburns framed his face, and atop his head was a tall black Stetson. His beady black eyes were cold and uncaring.

Mare-velous could recognize King Longhorn anywhere.

The two bulls from the bar approached him, showing him the burlap sack.

"We got the very best!" Buffalo Bull said.

"And for half the price too!" Doc Holstein said.

"Very good," Longhorn said with a grin. "Madcow will love these."

Madcow? Mare-velous thought. *I don't remember Longhorn havin' a Madcow in his gang. Must be someone new.*

"Take them to Madcow's room," Longhorn said, waving his cloven hoof. "That'll be all."

The two bulls nodded and left the room. With a contented sight, Longhorn leaned back in his chair and put up his back hooves on the table.

"I don't know about you, boys," he said, placing his front hooves behind his head, "but I'm downright tired of this city scene. What say

first thing tomorrow we head back west to Appleloosa?"

"I do miss them country cow gals," said a brown and dark gray bull Mare-velous recognized as Jersey Shore.

"And them apple farms," said a white bull named Angus McSteer.

"Yeah, they were fun to pillage and stuff!"

Longhorn nodded. "I reckon I'm curious to see what happened to them Smiths. Those foals of theirs are sure to be all grown up by now."

Jersey Shore sneered. "Ya reckon them gals of theirs are old enough to marry?"

"If so, that'd make takin' over their farm a heck of a lot easier. And legal!"

Mare-velous didn't know if she should growl from fury or gag in disgust. *No way is he gettin' his filthy cloven hooves on* my *farm! And* certainly *not on me or Apple Bloom!*

"Tell Madcow to pack it in," Longhorn said. "We'll be off in the mornin'."

That was her final confirmation that it had to be done tonight, or else she was never going to get another chance. Gripping her glowing rope for support, Mare-velous kicked the grate open and jumped down, startling the Cattle Rustlers. Landing on the table, she faced the stunned leader.

"Howdy, partner," she said in a tone that was both taunting and threatening.

Jersey Shore and Angus stood up, but Longhorn raised his hoof to stop them. Scrutinizing her, he sent her a toothy grin.

"I heard you were in town," he said with amusement, "Miss Applejack Smith."

Mare-velous narrowed her eyes at him.

"What? Surprised I knew? After all, you weren't masked the last time we met." He shrugged. "Would've made big money selling your identity to the highest bidder, but what would've been the fun in that?"

"Ya remember me then," she said, taking a step towards him.

"How could I forget the little orphan filly who tried to strangle me?"

"Ya mean the orphan filly whose parents ya skewered!"

He waved his hoof. "Details, details."

Fuming through her nostrils, Mare-velous telepathically swung her lasso into a loop. "Bright Mac and Buttercup Smith were good ponies. They didn't deserve to die!" She glared hard. "But *you* do."

Jersey Shore leaped towards her. Without looking at him, Mare-velous punched him in the face, sending him back to the wall. Angus jumped onto the table, only for her to kick him off.

"Come to finish what you've started then?" Longhorn asked, unfazed by his minions' unconscious states.

She smirked wickedly as she mentally cracked her rope like a whip. "Ya know me so well."

Shrugging, Longhorn climbed onto the table. "I hate to disappoint a lady."

He charged towards her, but Mare-velous was ready. Grabbing her rope, she let it hoist her up before his horns could pierce her. The minute she landed on his back, the rope closed around his neck. Longhorn attempted to buck her off, but Mare-velous had had enough rodeo experience not to lose her balance. She hung on tight to the rope as he wriggled and writhed beneath her.

"I ain't a filly no more!" she shouted, pulling the rope towards her. "I ain't lettin' ya go this time!"

The loop magically tightened around Longhorn's neck. He immediately stopped bucking and gasped for air. His hooves went to

his neck in an attempt to get the rope off, but it just kept getting tighter and tighter.

"I'm real *tight* with the Queen of the Underworld," Mare-velous said, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. "I'll *personally* make sure ya reach the Fields of Punishment!"

"Mare-velous, stop! Don't kill him!"

Alarmed, Mare-velous turned to the doorway where a certain masked dragon stood.

"Humdrum?" she said angrily. "I told ya to stay outside! How'd ya even get in here?!"

"I used my grappling hook to get across the street and went in through a window and shocked these guards with…" He shook his head. "That's not important right now! Mare-velous, you can't kill Longhorn!"

"Yes, I can!" she shouted, tugging harder on the rope. "And I will!"

"But if you do, you won't be Demeter's Vassal anymore!"

Grunting, she said, "That's a sacrifice I'm willin' to make."

Suddenly, Demeter's Lasso loosened around the bull's neck and stopped glowing, giving Longhorn a moment to breathe. It was as if the rope didn't want to strangle him.

"You can fight all ya want, Bessie," Mare-velous said, manually tightening the rope, "but I don't need no magic to do this!"

"Mare-velous, please!" Humdrum exclaimed, holding up his claws. "Is this what your parents would want?"

"My parents are *dead* !" she spat, furious tears coming from her eyes. "Thanks to this monster! He needs to pay for what he did to 'em!"

"Yes, he will! In jail!"

"Ya think the police can hold him? His horns can cut through buildings!" Longhorn wheezed as she tugged sharply. "This is the only way to make sure he'll never harm anyone ever again!"

"But you don't understand, Mare-velous! He's not just a criminal, he's a—"

"Daddy?"

The sudden small, frightened voice made Mare-velous stiffen. She turned to see a small brown and white calf, looking to be about eight years old, peering into the doorway. She wore a sparkly red dress and held a foal doll dressed in a pineapple gown in the crook of her foreleg. Her small black eyes held terror as they focused on Longhorn.

"Mad…cow…" Longhorn gasped between words. "R-Run…"

Breathing rapidly, Mare-velous looked between him and the calf.

"He has a daughter, Mare-velous!" Humdrum cried, pointing to the calf. "Korova kidnapped her! *That's* why he came to Maretropolis! He's been looking for his daughter! My guess is Korova was using her to get Longhorn to do shady stuff for him, and when he'd had enough, he took care of Korova and rescued his daughter!"

Longhorn nodded frantically as he attempted to speak. "Korova… wanted…me…kidnap…Twilight…Sparkle's…ward."

Mare-velous let out a small gasp and looked down at Humdrum, whose eyes were pleading in desperation.

"I know he's done terrible things, Mare-velous," he said, his voice cracking, "and you might never forgive him for what he did to your parents, but how will killing him make you any better than he is?" He glanced sideways at Madcow. "Would you also make a child parentless?"

Mare-velous locked eyes with the calf. Tears were coming out of them. For a split second, those black eyes were green, and the calf was an orange filly with blonde hair. Mare-velous could hear her own sobs from the past, could hear her small cries of fury, could

hear her young, cursing voice.

" *You killed 'em! You killed my Ma and Pa!* "

She looked down at Longhorn, whose face was turning from gray to blue.

" *I'll kill ya! I'll kill ya like you killed them!* "

The rope fell from her hooves, allowing Longhorn to pull it away from his neck. Gasping, he fell to his knees and Mare-velous slid off his back and onto the table. She sat down and stared down at her hooves, horrified at what she had almost done.

"Daddy!" Madcow cried happily, running to him.

Jumping onto the table, she threw her hooves around Longhorn's neck, but not too tight as to choke him a gain. With an exhausted chuckle, Longhorn held her close as well.

Mare-velous watched the two of them until the sound of police sirens reached her ears.

As the police hauled Longhorn into the wagon along with his gang, he looked at the social worker's car where he could see Madcow through the window. She gave him a sad wave, which made him smile a little bit.

Mare-velous watched the entire scene from afar as she dealt with her mixed emotions.

"They'll be putting Madcow into foster care," Humdrum said, walking up to her side.

She hung her head. "She must hate me."

He shook his head. "She still has her daddy, thanks to you."

Closing her eyes, she said, "She almost didn't." She looked down at him. "How'd ya know about Longhorn's daughter?"

"Well, after hearing the information about the doll and the dresses and the child's room in Korova's mansion, it wasn't hard to put two and two together."

Biting her lip, she tore her gaze from him. "I'm sorry for makin' ya feel like ya weren't cut out for all this. Truth is I just didn't wanna see ya get hurt."

He gently took her hoof, causing her to glance down at his claw. "I know."

He held her hoof for a few seconds before she slipped it away.

"I could've made the biggest mistake of my life," she murmured, "if it hadn't been for you." She smiled softly. "You're a good kid, Spike."

The dragon blushed. "That's what friends are for."

The Matter-Horn walked up to them. "You did a good job. Both of you." She glared down at Humdrum. "Even if it's *way* past somebody's bedtime."

Laughing nervously, he asked, "How'd you even know I was following her? I mean *before* you checked our commlink signals."

The alicorn smirked. "I know *you* , Humdrum." She nudged him playfully. "You're just as stubborn as Mare-velous."

Mare-velous scoffed. "No argument here."

"Come on," the Matter-Horn said, crouching down. "Let's get you home. It's been a long night."

As he climbed onto her back, Humdrum looked at Mare-velous. "You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. I best get home to my little sis," she said with a grin, "tell her I love her."

Apple Bloom, Delancey and Fluttershy were curled up on the couch,

eating from a bowl of popcorn as they watched the movie *Spidermane* . They were at the part where the hero in his civilian identity was talking to his love interest while visiting his aunt in the hospital.

" *Oh, I'm real tight with Spidermane* ," he said onscreen. " *Why just the other day he was asking about you.* "

" *What'd you say?* " the mare onscreen asked hopefully.

" *I said…the best thing about MJ, is that when you look into her eyes…* "

"Oh, just tell her you love her, ya idiot!" Apple Bloom cried, throwing a piece of popcorn at the TV. "She obviously likes *both* sides of ya!"

Fluttershy giggled as she reached for some popcorn, only for her hoof to brush against Delancey's. They locked gaze for a moment and then turned away blushing.

As the movie went on, Delancey started to hear snoring and turned to find Apple Bloom asleep on his shoulder.

"Should we put her to bed?" he asked, not sure what to do in a situation like this.

"We shouldn't," Fluttershy said, leaning against his other shoulder. "She looks comfortable."

Delancey's face turned red. He was unable to concentrate on the movie as he was too focused on the feel of Fluttershy's face on his shoulder.

At the end of the movie, Spidermane's love interest was declaring her love for him, but he told her that they could only be friends, causing her to cry. Looking down at Fluttershy, Delancey discovered that she too had fallen asleep.

He watched her as the credits rolled, taking note of how lightly she breathed when she slept, making no sounds whatsoever. Glancing back to make sure Apple Bloom was asleep, he focused on his left hoof and morphed it into an eagle's claw. Fluttershy moaned

blissfully as he ran his claw through her mane.

"My dear, sweet Fluttershy," he whispered, gently taking a strand of soft hair between his fingers, "you have no idea how much you mean to me." He gazed down at her tranquil smile. "I more than just love you. I *worship* you." He smirked. "Imagine that. A god worshipping a mortal.

"But it's true. I owe my freedom to you." He rested his claw on her head. "Everything just feels so *right* when I'm with you, even if I have to keep up this pretense to be with you." He sighed sadly. "I don't like pretending. I want you to love me. *All* of me. But I can't give you what you deserve. Not as a god, nor as a mortal."

He whispered in her ear. "You deserve to be happy, my darling. But don't worry. Once I have my amulet—"

The sound of the door unlocking made him stop. Quickly, he turned the claw back into a hoof and stood up, his horn ready for the intruder. The door opened and the lights were switched on.

With a mighty cry, Delancey summoned a pie and tossed it at the doorway. The intruder screeched and ducked as the pie went over her head and hit the wall behind her.

"What in tarnation?" Applejack said.

"Who are you?" Delancey demanded, taking a step forward.

"Who are *you* ? This is *my* apartment!"

His magic diminished. "You're Fluttershy's roommate?"

"Yeah," Applejack said, crossing her hooves. "I'll ask again. Who are *you* ?"

Blushing, the stallion bowed apologetically. "Delancey. Sorry."

"Oh." She sighed in relief. "Right. You're Fluttershy's new beau."

By this time, Fluttershy and Apple Bloom were stirring awake. When Fluttershy saw her roommate, she gasped and rushed to Delancey's

side.

"Oh, Applejack, I'm so sorry! I'd forgotten that I'd set up a date with Delancey so when he came over I suggested he help me protect Apple Bloom and he's been so good with her I thought it was alright and please don't be mad at—"

"I'm not mad," Applejack said, chuckling. "Just wish ya'd introduced him to me *before* he threw a pie at me."

She sent him a glare, making Delancey stiffen.

"Guess that's my cue to leave," he said, already skittering towards the door. "Shall we reschedule our picnic for tomorrow?"

"Sounds good!" Fluttershy called, waving.

"I'll be counting the minutes!"

He flashed her one last smile before shutting the door. Applejack shook her head.

"When ya said ya were seein' some pony, I didn't think it'd be any pony so… *energetic* ."

"Applejack?" Apple Bloom muttered, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

Applejack was immediately at her side. "I'm here, sis."

She looked up at her older sister. "Did ya get Longhorn?"

Applejack grinned widely as tears started rolling down her cheeks. "He's goin' away for a long time, Apple Bloom. He won't be hurtin' us anymore."

Apple Bloom cried out in happiness as she threw her hooves around her sister.

"I love ya sis," Applejack whispered, holding her tightly. "And I ain't never lettin' ya go again."

Twilight yawned as she entered her bedroom. Dropping the towel from her body, she reached for her silk purple bathrobe on the door's hook. She was more than ready to get to bed as she tied the sash around her waist.

"Never took you for the silk robe type."

With a shriek, Twilight spun around, shocked to find the Phoenix sitting cross-legged on her bed. Twilight immediately wrapped her hooves around her body, wondering how long she had been there.

"Oh, do relax," the Phoenix said, rolling her eyes. "Like I haven't seen you naked before. You didn't exactly wear clothes that often in school."

Twilight looked at the locked window. Not that she expected it to be open, as it would've set off the alarm.

"How'd you get in here?"

The Phoenix uncrossed her back legs. "Came down the chimney."

The billionaire blinked. "I don't have a chimney."

"Exactly," the thief said, sliding off the bed.

Deciding it wasn't worth dwelling on, Twilight shook her head. "What are you doing in my bedroom? If this is another seduction attempt —"

The Phoenix scoffed. "If I was here to seduce you," she said, pulling on the front of her jumpsuit, "I would've slipped into something more comfortable."

She let the fabric snap back into place. "No. I just thought I should inform you that I saw a particularly small, purple dragon at the bar today. A *criminal* bar, I might add." She looked accusingly at Twilight. "But of course, you already knew that, didn't you?"

The lavender mare narrowed her eyes. "What's your point?"

"My point is that I don't mind this little hero biz of yours. It's quite fun,

actually." The Phoenix stalked towards her. "On the other hand, getting *Spike* involved—a ten-year-old who should be in *school* rather than chasing criminals—now that's something I don't quite approve of."

" *Spike* ," Twilight said through her teeth, "is none of your business."

"He *was* my business," the Phoenix said, thrusting her face into hers, "the moment I helped you save his egg from those smugglers!" She narrowed her gaze. "You're lucky I was able to get him out of that scrape at the bar, because if anything happens to Spike on your watch," she stepped back with determination, "our little pact is off.

"Of course," she said, turning her back to her, "I'm all up for a custody battle."

Growling, Twilight stepped forward. "You stay away from Spike!"

"Like I said," the Phoenix said, glancing back at her. "If anything happens to him, look out."

Her horn illuminated and she disappeared in a burst of flames, setting off the sprinkler system. As the water rained down on her, Twilight glared at the ring of ash on her carpet.

This arc was based on the "Justice League Unlimited" episode "Double Date." Also reading some *Huntress* comics helped (one of my new favorite superheroes). And of course some *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and *Spiderman* references (obviously). The henchbulls are from the MLP comic arc featuring Longhorn. Madcow is my own creation.

Next arc will feature another villain from the MLP comics.

The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 1

" *Yes, love is all about sacrifice and compromise, but it's important also to establish a limit. You shouldn't have to throw your whole life away to make a relationship work. If you have to lose yourself to please your partner, you're with the wrong person."*

- Beau Taplin

The early morning sky was gray as the Power Ponies, aside from Mistress Mare-velous, gathered in the control room. They were all so exhausted from the early wake-up call that neither of them had changed into their super suits.

"What could be so important that it had to be this early?" Rainbow asked with a yawn. "Celestia hasn't even raised the sun yet, and I was up half the night rounding up those jailbirds."

"I know what you mean, darling," Rarity said, looking at herself through her compact mirror. "I am getting these hideous bags under my eyes from lack of beauty sleep."

"Well I feel *great* !" Pinkie piped, chugging a cup of coffee. "Woo! You can really feel the buzz after twenty cups!"

"So sorry to have woken you all," Twilight said, facing the four mares and dragon, "but it's on a matter of utmost importance."

"Oh my," Fluttershy said, putting her hoof to her mouth. "There's no scary monster attacking Maretropolis, is there?"

"I think we might've heard that on the news," Rainbow said.

"Or noticed it on the way here!" Pinkie said energetically, crushing the paper cup against her head.

"It's not a mission, but it's still important," Twilight said as she began

pacing. "As you all know, Mare-velous has gone to Appleloosa to spend some time with her family and won't be back for a few weeks."

"After putting her lifelong nemesis in prison," Rarity said, "I can't blame her for wanting a vacation."

"Not to mention her little sister missed her very much," Fluttershy said.

"Any pony else worried that this Longhorn guy might break out like all the others do on a weekly basis?" Rainbow asked.

"Longhorn's been placed in a solid steel cell," Twilight said, "which has walls laced with electricity, so he'll have a hard time crashing his horns through there."

Rainbow narrowed her eyes. "Why can't Balkham do that for *all* the villains?"

"Anyway," Twilight continued, coming to a stop, "with Mare-velous' absence in mind, I understand this is an inconvenient time to be telling you that I will be taking a vacation as well."

"What?!" the mares exclaimed.

"You couldn't have waited until *after* Mare-velous came back?!" Rainbow demanded.

"I wish I could, but," Twilight said, biting her lip, "after what happened with Sunset Shimmer, I need to…take a breather, something that doesn't involve battling criminals or business. It'll only be for a week, I promise."

"Trust me," Spike said in a whisper. "She needs this. I've been trying to convince her to take a vacation for *years* ."

"Where are you going?" Fluttershy asked.

"Camping," Twilight said simply. "But I'm afraid I can't tell you where."

"Why ever not?" Rarity asked.

Rainbow crossed her hooves. "Ya got more secrets?"

"It's not that," Twilight said, holding up a hoof. "The point of this vacation is to get away from criminals, and you all know there's one criminal in this town who makes it her top priority to know where I am all the time, and I'd rather *not* have her following me on this trip. The fewer who know, the better."

"Makes sense," Pinkie said with a shrug. "I once followed my sister Maud on her rock research trip and she was *furious* that I'd tagged along without asking. Might've been the rock candy pie I brought her."

"So hang on," Rainbow said. "If Mare-velous is gone, and *you're* leaving, who's gonna be in charge of this team?"

Twilight grinned at her. "You are."

Rainbow jumped so suddenly, her glasses fell off. "Um…what?"

"You will be leading the team in my absence, Zapp."

"Congrats, Dashie!" Pinkie piped.

"I know you'll do great," Fluttershy said sweetly.

"You do seem like the best pony for the job, darling," Rarity said, using her magic to replace Rainbow's glasses.

Rainbow, meanwhile, was stunned, her eyes open wide. "A-Are ya sure, Twilight? I mean…I've never led a team before. Well, except maybe in high school, but this isn't stormball!"

"I've given it careful consideration," Twilight said, "and concluded that of the four remaining adult members, you are best suited for acting leader."

"What about Rarity?" Rainbow asked, pointing to the white unicorn. "She's about as organized as you."

"Oh, darling, I couldn't *possibly* ," Rarity said, waving her hoof. "It's difficult enough to juggle crime fighting and fashion designing as it is."

"What about Flutter—?"

"No!" Fluttershy cried, shaking her head with fear.

"Okay then. Pinkie Pie?"

Looking over at the pink pony, Rainbow caught her trying to catch a donut dangling from a lock of her mane with her tongue.

"Never mind," Rainbow said.

"You have nothing to worry about, Rainbow," Twilight said, levitating a scroll of parchment into view. "Everything you need to know is on this list."

Rainbow took the scroll in her hooves and then watched as the paper dropped to the floor and rolled out, stretching across the room.

"Uh…" Rainbow said unsurely. "Have you considered Spike?"

"Spike will have his claws full already handling business affairs with Dr. Hope at Sparkle Labs," Twilight explained.

"I've got my own list," Spike said, holding up another heavy scroll.

"You'll be fine, Rainbow," Twilight said, placing a hoof on her friend's shoulder. "If you're not sure what to do, just look to the list. If that doesn't help, I'll just be a phone call away, but I have faith that it won't come to that." She smiled kindly. "I know you can do this."

Rainbow looked at her uncertainly. Twilight appeared so confident, and yet Rainbow felt…scared. It was strange. She was usually confident about these things, but she'd never imagined she'd be named team leader, if only for a week. She wanted to say no, but she didn't want to disappoint her friend after declaring that she had faith in her.

"Okay," Rainbow said, taking a deep breath. "I'll do my best."

"Good," Twilight said, stepping back. "I better go. I have a train to catch." She started towards the elevator and pressed the button. "Remember! Don't hesitate to call if there's any trouble!" The doors opened and she stepped inside. "But I'm sure it won't be anything you can't handle!"

As the elevator doors shut, Rainbow looked to the rest of her teammates, who were staring at her expectantly. Gulping, she glanced at the list and skimmed through the first section.

"Uh…okay," Rainbow said, clearing her throat as she stood in Twilight's previous position. "So according to this list, Saddle Rager's on monitor duty tonight, while I patrol from eight to one am and Fili-Second patrols from one to six am. Tomorrow night, Radiance takes monitor duty, Saddle Rager is first on patrol and I'm second." She squinted at the parchment. "Also, there's a side note that Humdrum can either join one of us on patrol or stay with whoever's on monitor duty, as long as he gets minimum six hours sleep, eight is preferable. Okay, that's pretty straightforward. Any questions?"

Rarity raised her hoof.

"Yeah?"

"Are there any specific hooligans we should be on the lookout for?" Rarity asked. "Any escapees from Balkham, perhaps?"

Rainbow went further down the scroll and read a section aloud. " *While we've managed to capture most of Balkham's escapees, as well as the Diamond Dogs, the Great and Powerful Trixie is still at large. Don't forget to also be on the lookout for the Phoenix and Discord. Do not attempt to capture Discord, as we have no means of containing him at this moment, but keep him away from the Chaos Amulet at all costs.* " She rolled her eyes. "Like we need a list to tell us *that* ."

She continued reading. " *The dark protection spells I've put around the amulet should be able to repel Discord, but if they fail, call*

Saddle Rager. I've theorized that since her powers originate from Discord, she might be the only one who can do him real harm. "

Fluttershy hung her head and muttered sadly, "I can't argue with that."

" *Trixie, on the other hoof, should be far easier to capture. My guess is she'll be after the newest additions to the Anugyptian exhibit at the museum.* "

"How come?" Rarity wondered.

"Duh!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Because they're super-duper cursed and super-duper shiny! Kind of Trixie's thing, you know?"

Rainbow cried out suddenly as she dropped the list. "The Anugyptian exhibit! I completely forgot! Mr. Fetlock wanted me to come in early today to help him!" She looked at the clock on the wall and shrieked. "I'm gonna be late!"

She zipped off and then came back a second later.

"Go do…whatever it is you do during the day! Keep your commlinks online! Bye!"

She flew hastily to the elevator just as it opened up. Once the doors closed, she heaved a heavy sigh and slunk to the floor.

"Me? Leader?" she said in disbelief. "Is Twilight crazy? I can't even get to work on time! How am I supposed to lead a whole team of superheroes?"

When Rainbow Dash arrived at the museum, Mr. Fetlock was in the Anugyptian exhibit. He, some movers and security guards were removing valuable ancient objects from crates and placing them in display cases.

"You're late," Mr. Fetlock muttered without turning to face her.

Rainbow laughed awkwardly as she pushed her glasses up her

nose. "Sorry, boss. Slept in."

"Whatever. Make yourself useful and open that last crate, will you?"

He pointed to a long rectangular crate that looked big enough to hold a pony. Fetching a crowbar from the floor, Rainbow pried the top open. She gasped at the sight of a golden sarcophagus. Its carved face was that of a stallion's, surrounded by a pharaoh's headdress. Its carved hooves crossed the casket's chest, holding a crook and flail, further supporting the theory that this belonged to a pharaoh.

"Holy moly!" Rainbow exclaimed in awe. "Boss, you didn't tell me we were getting a *mummy* !"

With a small smile, Mr. Fetlock walked up to her side. "Allow me to introduce you to King Amenhooftep, Pharaoh of Anugypt."

"Amenhooftep?" Rainbow said, leaning over the side of the crate. "Wasn't he the guy who had seven wives?"

"You know your Anugyptian history," Mr. Fetlock said in admiration.

She shrugged. "Daring and I were there for a few weeks searching for the tomb of Somnambula. We never found it, but we did unearth a temple built by Amenhooftep."

"Ah, yes. Tell me. Were the walls embedded with jewels?"

"Yeah, all around!"

Mr. Fetlock nodded. "Amenhooftep was an admirer of beautiful things and insisted that he always be surrounded by them. Jewels, gold," he said, glancing sideways at Rainbow, "mares."

"Explains the seven wives," Rainbow snorted. "What a pig."

"It's true. Once he set his eyes on a mare even more beautiful than the last, he had his current wife…disposed of." Mr. Fetlock gestured to the wall, where a slab of Anugyptian hieroglyphs hung. "This was taken from Amenhooftep's tomb. It tells the story of how he met his seventh and greatest wife."

Rainbow walked up to the slab. On it was the image of a pharaoh and a queen. The mare was light blue with violet eyes and a mane of many colors. The pharaoh was gray with green eyes. His headdress was gold and blue, matching his anklets, necklace and artificial beard.

"Hey," Rainbow said, squinting at the image. "He looks kinda like you, Boss."

"Yes," Mr. Fetlock said, gazing at the pharaoh. "My family is descended from the pharaohs, which is why I made Ancient Anugypt my focus study."

"That explains your cutie mark," she said, glancing at the white ankh on his flank.

"Neighfertiti," he said, pointing to the painted queen, "was Amenhooftep's favorite wife, not only for her beauty, but for her mind. She was his intellectual equal and melted his heart in a way his previous wives had not." He looked over at Rainbow Dash to see her fascination with the hieroglyphs. "She taught him to see beauty in everything and advised that he rule with fairness instead of fear."

Rainbow frowned suddenly. "My hieroglyphics are a little rusty, but," she said, pointing to the bottom of the slab, "I think those say 'queen' and 'death.'"

"You are correct," Mr. Fetlock said, impressed. "Unfortunately, while Amenhooftep's marriage with Neighfertiti was a happy one, it only lasted a few years, until his beloved queen fell ill. Thinking her death was punishment from the gods for executing his previous wives, Amenhooftep cursed himself that he would never find peace until he and his love were reunited."

He turned back to the sarcophagus and nodded to one of the unicorn movers. Using his magic, the worker levitated the lid off the sarcophagus, revealing a cleanly wrapped mummy inside. Rainbow's eyes widened, for the wrappings didn't show any signs of decay.

"It," she said in disbelief, "looks as if he'd been wrapped only

yesterday."

"Amenhooftep wanted his body to be as preserved as possible," Mr. Fetlock said, "and ordered the high priests to cast a spell on it so that he would be as handsome and youthful as he was when he first met Neighfertiti. Even in death, beauty meant everything to him. According to the hieroglyphs, he even ordered that his organs not be removed as was normal."

"Seriously?" Rainbow shook her head. "I'll bet the high priests weren't too happy about that."

"They weren't, but they could not disobey their pharaoh, even in death." He gazed at the bandaged face. "Legend has it, because his body did not undergo the proper rituals, his spirit is still trapped inside his body."

Rainbow shivered. "I hope that part's just a legend. I'd hate it if another of our exhibits just got up and walked away."

Mr. Fetlock chuckled, which made her turn to him in confusion. She'd never heard him chuckle before.

"Are you alright, Boss?"

Clearing his throat, he resumed his usual stern expression. "Yes, yes. It would be most unfortunate. It was expensive enough getting all these artifacts here. The museum can only get so much funding!"

"Doesn't our funding come from Twilight Sparkle?"

"Yes, but even *she* has her limits!" Sighing, he put a hoof to his forehead. "First we lose the Alicorn Amulet, then Zeus' Lightning Bolt, then the Head of Anubis, then the statue of Discord *and* the Chaos Amulet, then the cuffs of Neightocris, and then the Golden Ice Cream Scooper of Shanghay!"

"Didn't we get those last two back?"

"Yes, but they were badly scraped! Half of our missing artifacts are being 'guarded,'" he flexed his front hooves like air quotes, "by the Power Ponies! I can't *believe* Twilight Sparkle actually *allows* that

idiot mare Zip to carry Zeus' Bolt around like a taser!"

"Zapp!"

"What?"

"Uh," Rainbow said, biting her lip guiltily. "H-Her name is…Z-Zapp."

"I don't care what her name is! She and the Power Ponies have no respect for museum property whatsoever! Ancient artifacts should be preserved, not flailed around like toys!"

Desperate to change the subject, Rainbow said, "So, uh, how about we put the sarcophagus up there?" She pointed to the dead end of the hall. "That way, the pharaoh can look at all his treasures like he, uh, did in life?"

Looking up, Mr. Fetlock smiled at her. "Excellent idea, Miss Dash. Unlike those Power Pony vandals, we historians have a great respect for ancient relics."

Rainbow forced a chuckle. "Yup! Great respect!" She turned to the movers. "Okay, fellas, let's get the king to his new sleeping quarters!"

As she guided the unicorns in the levitation of the sarcophagus, Mr. Fetlock watched Rainbow Dash in thought.

"How long have you worked here, Miss Dash?"

"Dunno," Rainbow said, gesturing to the workers to lower the coffin. "Almost a year, I guess. No, no, a little to the right."

He walked slowly up to her side. "It seems I've taken your skills for granted. We do have some other new exhibits coming in this month. Perhaps we can discuss them…over dinner?"

"Yeah, sure—hey, careful!" Rainbow shouted at the workers as they leaned the sarcophagus against the wall. "There's a three-thousand-year-old mummy in there!"

Mr. Fetlock grinned in satisfaction. "Tonight then?"

"Busy tonight," she said, immediately remembering her patrol duty the next two nights. "How about the night after tomorrow?"

"Thursday night it is then! I'll make reservations at *Hisan's* . Will seven o'clock suffice?"

"Yeah, that sounds good—easy!" She held out her hooves. "Easy, easy…perfect!"

The unicorns released their hold on the sarcophagus, leaving it leaning carefully against the wall at the end of the hallway.

"A spot fit for a king, if I do say so myself," Rainbow said, placing her hooves on her hips as she admired her work. "Whaddya think, boss?"

"Intriguing," Mr. Fetlock said, his eyes on his assistant rather than the coffin.

Confused by his word choice, Rainbow turned to him with a raised eyebrow. "Uh…sure." As she turned back to the pharaoh, she muttered under her breath, "Guys are weird."

"That was wonderful!" Fluttershy exclaimed happily as she and her boyfriend exited the teashop. "Don't you just love our Tuesday Teas, Delancey?"

"Hmm?" Delancey said sleepily. He shook out of his daze and smiled brightly at the mare. "Oh, yes, yes! I just *love* drinking tea!" Without wavering his smile, he ground his teeth together. "All…the…time." He straightened up. "Not that I don't enjoy it or anything, but…couldn't we try something a little…different?"

"Oh, I'm glad you asked!" Fluttershy said excitedly. "Because I wanted to ask if you wanted to do something with me tomorrow."

"Really?" His expression became hopeful. "What is it? Paintball? Laser tag? Swing dancing?"

"Uh, no. There's an unveiling at the Anugyptian exhibit at the

museum tomorrow. My friend Rainbow who works there tells me a mummy's involved!"

"Oh." His face fell. "Museum. *Fun* ."

In truth, he wasn't too thrilled about going back to the place in which he'd been imprisoned for over a decade. Even though he hadn't seen much in his stone state, there didn't seem much point in seeing a bunch of old stuff from eras he'd already *lived* through.

Seeing his bored expression, Fluttershy frowned. "Oh, I understand if you don't want to, but you see the museum is a special place for me. I've been going there ever since…"

She trailed off, though Delancey already knew what she was talking about. It touched him that she considered the place where she'd visited him special. And now he had the chance to fully be there with her.

"I…said it was fun, didn't I?" he said.

"Oh, goody!" Fluttershy said cheerfully. "I'm glad you'll be there. I never get to do anything like this with the girls. Just hanging out and talking like normal ponies."

"Yes," Delancey said, forcing a laugh. "Normal is… *fun* ! Have you, uh, read any good books lately?"

"Oh, yes! I just read this one where a mare is kidnapped by a monster, forced to be his bride, but over time…"

While Fluttershy went on explaining the story, Delancey let out a yelp as he suddenly fell forward. Looking down, he saw his front right hoof, the one furthest away from Fluttershy's view, had fallen *through* the sidewalk! Pulling it put up towards his face, he found that his hoof was becoming transparent.

With a small gasp, he looked at Fluttershy in panic. Fortunately, she was too engrossed in her story to have noticed.

Quick, Discord! Delancey thought, glancing around frantically. *Do something chaotic before it's too late!*

Across the street, he spotted a little filly licking an ice cream cone and grinned mischievously. Curling his black tail to resemble two fingers, Delancey snapped it. In a flash, the filly's ice cream cone grew arms and legs, a smiley face appearing on the top scoop. Screaming, the filly dropped the cone and ran away, the ice cream chasing her on its tiny legs.

Delancey chortled in delight and watched as his hoof became solid again.

"What's so funny?" Fluttershy asked.

"Nothing!" he said quickly, placing his hoof behind his back. "I was just, uh, laughing at your delightful story, my dear!"

She blinked. "You think it's funny that the monster accidentally hit his bride-to-be?"

He bit his lip. "Y-Y-Yes, because…it was absolutely ridiculous that he would think some pony as lovely as her would love a monster like him after he kept her prisoner, right?"

The last word came out as a squeak.

"I don't know," Fluttershy said quietly. "He wasn't *all* bad."

Delancey cocked his head. " *You'd* want to be with a monster who held you prisoner and then struck you?"

She blushed deeply. "I wouldn't go *that* far. I just believe there's good in every pony, regardless of their mistakes," the rest she muttered under her breath, "or their appearance."

"Right," Delancey said, shivering at the memory of their first official meeting. Eager to change the subject, he piped up, "So I was in the market the other day and—oop!"

His hoof fell through the sidewalk again, this time his left one. Thinking he had tripped, Fluttershy gasped and rushed to his side.

"Oh, goodness! Are you alright?"

"Eek!" Delancey quickly hid his newly transparent hoof in his red-knit jacket. "I'm fine! Just, err, weak knees, is all! It's been lovely having tea with you, dear, but I really must be going!"

"Well, okay then," Fluttershy said, waving to him as he dashed off. "See you at noon tomorrow?"

"See you late—ah!"

As he was turning into an alley, he fell forward again as his other hoof started to fade away too. To his luck, Fluttershy was too far away to see this time.

"Oh, shoot." He quickly ignited his horn. "Come on, come on, Chaos Dimension!"

Slashing the air, he ripped a hole in the fabric of reality and leaped into it. Once he was in his Realm of Chaos, he sighed in relief and turned back into his draconequus form.

"Tables that fly!" Discord cried out, waving his arms frantically about as he made new objects appear. "Piñatas that sneeze! Oranges that croak! Balloons that inflate and pop themselves!"

Once his appendages were solid again, he sighed heavily and collapsed on a spiked divan he had pulled up beneath himself.

"That was a close one," Discord said, kissing his paw and claw. "So sorry you had to endure that, my babies!" Sighing again, he dropped his arms to his sides. "What's happening to me?"

Something slapped him on the back of his head. Yelping, he turned to a copy of himself wearing spectacles, suddenly sitting beside him with his paw and claw on his hips.

"You're fading out of existence, you idiot!" the clone shouted. "Don't you remember what happened to Pan?"

Nodding, Discord massaged his aching head. "He stopped cleaning up his woods out of protest and then faded out of existence."

"Exactly! This," the clone used air quotes, "'normal' stuff you've been

doing with Fluttershy goes against your very chaotic nature! That mare's going to be the death of you! Literally!"

"But I can't just stop seeing her!" Discord protested, slapping his paw over his heart. "She's the love of my life, my future queen!"

"But you two have absolutely nothing in common! Surely you've noticed the things she likes to do tend to be… *bland* ."

"Fluttershy? Bland?" Discord scoffed. "Never!"

"Tuesday Tea? Talking about the weather and books? Having a *routine* ?"

Discord bit his lip. "Alright, so…our dates have been getting… repetitive, but that doesn't mean—"

"The girl heals animals for living! What could be more harmonious? Face it. She doesn't have a chaotic bone in her body."

Discord opened his mouth to disagree, but then stopped himself. It was true. Fluttershy was the most tranquil, most civil, most normal mare he'd ever met. Meanwhile, he was…well, chaotic.

He shook his head. "That doesn't mean I can't love her! I *like* spending time with her, no matter how bland it gets! It's nice to take a little break from this crazy place every now and then."

"Even if it means risking your very existence?" the clone asked, crossing his arms.

"I'd do anything for that mare! She set us free, after all, gave us company when no one else would. She makes us want to act in ways we've never acted before. We can't stop seeing her."

"Then there's only one solution."

"What?"

The clone locked his gaze on the original. "You have to drop the charade."

The reply surprised Discord so much, he fell off the couch and into a pit of gelatin. "Are you insane?! If I reveal myself to her, she'll know I lied to her and she'll never want to see me again!"

"Well you can't pretend to be a mortal pony forever!"

Suddenly, a light bulb appeared over Discord's head. "Maybe not with my *current* power." He stood up and scraped the gelatin off of him, forming it into the shape of an amulet. "But if my power were *limitless* , I could be whatever I'd like for as *long* as I'd like!"

The clone grinned. " *Now* you're acting like your mischievous old self."

"You sure you'll be okay here by yourself?" Zapp asked Fluttershy at Headquarters before leaving for patrol.

"I won't be alone, Zapp," Fluttershy said with a kind smile. "Spike will be here too."

Zapp looked over at Spike, who was playing video games on the monitor. "Still, I know you can take care of yourself, but your Saddle Rager form doesn't always come out when you want it to."

"I've been getting better at it. I'll be fine."

"And you're sure you're not tired?"

She shook her head. "I took a long nap before coming here, and if I get too tired from watching the screens," she held up a book, "I brought reading material."

"Yeah, we'll keep each other up!" Spike called as he blasted another digital zombie pony. "Eat my shovel, undead scum!"

"Still not convinced," Zapp said, "but I trust you, Fluttershy. But if you *do* need anything, I'll be flying around half the night, so don't hesitate to call."

Zapp reluctantly flew off while Fluttershy waved.

The hours dragged on as Fluttershy and Spike took turns watching the monitors. At around eleven, Spike, being much younger and needing more sleep, dozed off on the couch. Sitting at the desk, Fluttershy too had trouble keeping her eyes open. In truth, her nap earlier hadn't been as long as she'd let on, not to mention she'd lost a lot of sleep the previous night catching criminals.

Eventually, she lost the battle against sleep and allowed her head to fall gently onto the desk.

"Fluttershy," a rich voice whispered in her ear.

"Hmm?" Fluttershy uttered as her eyes slowly opened.

"Wake up, my darling."

Her eyes snapped open the rest of the way as she looked up at the person who'd awoken her. There he was, standing over her, his long neck craned down so his head could be at her level.

"Discord?" she said in a small voice. "How…how did you get in here? Why aren't the alarms going off?"

"Please," Discord said in a huff. "Like that Matty-Horn's magic is any match for mine!"

"You…you can't be here," Fluttershy said, reaching for her bracelet. "I can't let you get the amulet."

"I'm not here for the amulet."

She looked up at him in surprise. "Y-You're not?"

He shook his head.

"Then…why *are* you here?"

Locking gaze with her, he took her face in his paw, making her gasp at his soft touch.

"I've come for you, my love," he whispered, his voice dropping to an octave that sent a shiver up her spine.

Her heart beat faster as his face drew closer.

"N-No," she said, attempting to pull away. "I can't. There's…there's someone else."

He only chuckled. "No there isn't."

She scowled. "Yes, there is!"

"No," he said, placing his claw on the other side of her face, "there isn't."

Grunting in anger, Fluttershy tried pushing his paw and claw away. "Yes, there is! And I'm sorry, Discord, but I really can't—"

She was cut off by his lips. She was so startled she didn't react at first. Her mind told her to push him away.

But her lips didn't want to.

Her eyes closed as she let him kiss her, let him tangle his claw into her mane, let him press her back against the desk. Fluttershy moaned as she struggled to breathe.

"Fluttershy," he whispered against her lips. "Fluttershy…"

"Fluttershy!" came another voice.

Suddenly, a blaring siren jolted Fluttershy a wake. She sat up in the rolling chair and glanced around at the blinking red room in confusion.

"It's Discord!" Spike shouted from behind her.

"Discord?!" Fluttershy squealed, her face turning red. "What about Discord?"

"He's the intruder!" He pointed at the screen. "Look!"

Following his finger, Fluttershy spotted the camera footage for the vault containing the Chaos Amulet. Sure enough, there was Discord, standing there with his claw outstretched towards the amulet,

apparently cursing at the alarms.

"H-He's…here?" Fluttershy stammered, a flood of emotions overcoming her.

"We should call for backup," Spike said, reaching towards his ear.

"N-No." She stood up. "I…I'll take care of it."

The dragon looked her over in concern. "Are you okay, Fluttershy? You seem a bit…sweaty."

Her cheeks became redder. "I-It must be hot in here!"

"But it's air condit—"

"Don't question it!" she bellowed, a hint of her Saddle Rager voice coming out as she stomped towards the elevator.

"Uh, Fluttershy?" Spike called.

"WHAT?!" she shouted, her voice an octave lower.

Flinching, Spike pointed to her bracelets. "Your, uh, suit?"

She looked down at her ankles. "Oh, right."

Clicking the butterfly on one bracelet, she activated her suit just as the elevator doors opened. Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside.

Meanwhile, Discord was trying desperately to get past the magical shield around the Chaos Amulet.

"I knew that alicorn was clever," he said, grunting as the shield singed his claw, "but I didn't think she'd stoop to *dark magic* !" He tried reaching with his tail, only with the same result. "Why didn't I bother learning about these meddlesome Power Ponies? I didn't think they'd be much of a threat!"

"Um…excuse me?"

Discord turned to the source of the small voice: a small, masked

pegasus mare standing in the doorway to the safe.

Saddle Rager went completely still as soon as his gaze fell upon her. It had been so long since she had been in his presence, outside of her dreams. Even though he was stealing an evil artifact, the sight of him was still magnificent for her to behold. She gazed up at his tall figure, her legs shaking at the memory of her most recent dream.

Discord clearing his throat reminded Saddle Rager of her mission.

"Could you, um," she said, shaking out of her daze, "step away from there, please?"

Instead of complying with her request, he cocked his head curiously at her. "Well, now. Don't remember *you* from last time."

Saddle Rager's face fell. "You don't remember…?"

"No, I distinctly remember there being *five* pony heroes and one dragon. What? Were you on vacation or something or are you new?"

Then Saddle Rager recalled that Discord wasn't aware of her powers, for he had given them to her accidentally while he was in stone. *But can't he recognize my voice? He said he'd know my voice anywhere.*

"So, what's your power?" Discord asked, giving his claw a break from burning and trying to push his paw through the dark shield. "Invisibility? Might explain why I didn't see you last time. Do you also have one of the Gods' Gifts? Something lame like Aphrodite's Brooch?"

"L-Lame?" Saddle Rager said, shocked to hear this kind of language from him.

"Yes, lame," Discord said with a chuckle. "New word I've learned. Like your *lame* attempt to scare me with your itty bitty mousey little voice!"

Saddle Rager's jaw dropped. Discord was so…different. He'd never used this attitude with her before. Was this how he treated *every*

pony ?

"Seriously, what are you?" He looked her costume over. "Bionic Butterfly or something? Can you turn into a butterfly?" He scoffed. "Please! That's too easy! You can't expect me to fight a butterfly! That would be no fun!"

As he laughed, Saddle Rager scowled, her annoyance at his tone increasing. "My name is Saddle Rager."

"So what?" he said. "You turn into a raging saddle?"

She clenched her hooves and growled, "You're making me angry."

"Ooh," Discord said, waving his paw and claw around. "I'm *so* scared!"

Clutching his stomach, he fell on the floor laughing. As his laughter increased, so did Saddle Rager's anger.

"You don't…"

Discord stopped laughing upon hearing the sudden change in the mare's voice.

"…want…"

Looking back at her, he saw that she was increasing in size.

"…to make…"

Her suit split open as her muscles became buffer.

"…me…"

Discord gulped as she now towered over him.

"…ANGRY!" she bellowed in his face, blowing his mane back.

"What the—?" Discord started to say.

The mighty strike of Saddle Rager's hoof cut him off. He cried out as he hit the wall and fell to the ground. He massaged his aching side.

"That…hurt?"

Few things were able to hurt him: other gods, dark magic, other forms of chaos, now this creature.

He gazed up at the mighty beast. To think that a minute ago this was a gangly, pathetic-looking pegasus not half his size who could barely utter a word. Now it was a muscular, raging giant with the strength to hurt him?

"What *are* you?" he asked in bewilderment.

The creature only roared as she grabbed him and flung him across the hall. Discord quickly flapped his wings to slow himself down and slid across the floor to a stop before he hit the wall. Saddle Rager smashed out of the vault—he only just noticed the force field protecting the vault had not held her back, just as it hadn't held him back—and spun her head towards him, her eyes glowing red in fury.

"Sweet Hera," Discord said, his breath staggering as he looked her over again. "You're…you're…" His lips curled up into a smile. "…the most beautifully chaotic creature I've ever encountered!"

Saddle Rager ignored his comment and charged towards him. Chuckling, Discord summoned a red cape.

"Toro, toro!" he cried, waving the cape.

When she reached him, he stepped aside and swept the cape away.

"Olé!" he exclaimed cheerfully.

Saddle Rager turned back, steam fuming from her nostrils.

"You're really urging me to keep this gag up," Discord said, bouncing the cape in his claw.

Determined, Saddle Rager curled herself up into a ball and started hurdling towards Discord. Smirking, he flashed out of the way and summoned ten giant bowling pins in his place. The hero crashed through, leaving the two corner pins standing.

"Seven-ten split!" Discord called tauntingly. "Too bad!"

Coming out of her ball, Saddle Rager roared again.

"Not much of a talker, are you?"

Another roar came in reply.

"Back, back!" Discord cried, donning a lion tamer's attire, chair and whip included. "Back, foul beast!" He cracked the whip, barely missing her shoulder. "Not that there's anything wrong with being a beast, of course."

Unamused, Saddle Rager bounded on top of him, catching him by surprise as she pinned him to the ground and hollered in his face.

"This may be hard to believe," Discord said with a grin, "but this is the most fun I've had in *millennia* !" He cried out as her hooves dug into his shoulders with a *crunch!* "And the pain you're inflicting on me is *exhilarating* !"

Saddle Rager's scowl went away for a moment, turning into an expression of confusion.

Just then, Zapp burst through the stairwell. "Coming here was a big mistake, Discord!"

"That's what *you* think," Discord mumbled, not taking his eyes off Saddle Rager as he raised his paw. "Later, toots!"

With a snap of his fingers, he was gone in a flash, leaving both heroes in bewilderment. It took only a few seconds for Saddle Rager to shrink down.

"W-What happened?" she asked, surprised to see Zapp there. "Where's Discord?"

"He just…left," Zapp said. "Wow, you must've really scared him off!"

"Scared him?" Her eyes widened. "Oh dear."

"What? That's a good thing, isn't it?"

She wanted to say it wasn't. Saddle Rager didn't think Discord would be afraid of her monstrous form. She didn't *want* him to be, despite their last encounter.

She remembered his rudeness, his laughing at her as if she were nothing important. That was how she knew he really *didn't* know that Fluttershy and Saddle Rager were one in the same, otherwise he wouldn't have treated her that way. Still, it had stung. Not even the Discord in her dreams had ever acted that way.

This wasn't something she had told anyone, but even after Discord's release, her dreams involving him were still going on. His face wasn't hidden anymore, but they were getting more…intense. Although he'd touched her in somewhat pleasant ways a few times before, the dream she'd had just a few minutes ago had been the first time they'd actually kissed.

She'd thought Discord had been entering her dreams like he'd done in stone in an attempt to win her back, but if he hadn't known she was Saddle Rager, he couldn't have known she'd be here at Headquarters. If he'd been too busy stealing the Chaos Amulet during this time, he couldn't possibly have been entering her dream, right?

So…why had she been dreaming of him?

I'm back! I just had to work on a lot (still working on a lot), and had some setbacks when my external hard drive LITERALLY crashed (to the floor), causing me to lose a great number of files! Fortunately a number of them are replaceable/recoverable (because they're on the internet). Still really rattled me up for a while.

Egyptian names are after Amenhotep and Nefertiti, though obviously their stories aren't the same. They were just the only ones I could pun.

The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 2

" *You can get lost, pretending to be someone you're not."*

- Karen Hawkins

Though still thoroughly bored, Delancey took in the surroundings of the museum. In truth, he'd always been curious to see what lay beyond the sculpture gardens.

Just as dull as I imagined it , he thought.

Only perk was having Fluttershy at his side. Her attitude, in contrast, was very enthusiastic as she pointed out all the ancient artifacts. He wasn't really paying attention, especially as they passed through the Ancient Gracian section.

Been there, done that.

Instead, his mind was on the super heroine he had encountered last night. He'd spent half the night in his realm exploring one of his favorite modern inventions called "the internet" to find out whatever he could about this "Saddle Rager." From the news clips he'd uncovered, the meek little pegasus didn't seem to do much in battles. That is, until by some trigger she grew into an enormous giant! Before joining the Power Ponies, she had gone on a blind rampage laying waste to half the city!

I haven't seen a mare this destructive since Demeter froze the planet, he had thought excitedly.

At that moment, his spectacled clone had appeared. "Have a new obsession now, do we?"

Discord had slammed his laptop closed, his cheeks just as red as his laptop. "I'm not obsessed! I'm just…researching our opponent, trying to find her weakness so that next time we battle I can win and

get my amulet!"

His reasonable side had given him an incredulous look.

"Okay, so what if I'm impressed with her powers? Can't I appreciate some good, natural chaos? That doesn't mean I'm obsessed with her! You know I'm loyal to Fluttershy!"

And yet here he was, with the love of his life while thinking of another mare.

"Fluttershy, darling!" called Rarity's voice as Fluttershy and Delancey reached the Anugyptian exhibit.

Gasping, Fluttershy grabbed Delancey's hoof and dragged him over to join the waving unicorn in the crowd.

"Rarity, hi!" Fluttershy said, giving her friend a hug. "I didn't think you'd make it today."

"Well, when I explained to Suri how perusing ancient artifacts could produce the right inspiration for a new line, she was more than compliant!" Rarity's eyes narrowed. "Unfortunately, it appears I was a little *too* convincing."

She glanced sideways at Suri Polomare, who was admiring the wall of hieroglyphs.

"Yes, yes," Suri said in thought. "This pattern would look just lovely on a gown!"

"Uh," Coco Pommel said, looking at the placard. "It says here that these hieroglyphs describe an ancient blood ritual involving six maidens and—"

"Blood-red hemlines! Ingenious!" She started scribbling in her notepad. "Glad I thought of it, 'kay?"

Rolling her eyes away from her boss, Rarity finally noticed that Fluttershy hadn't come alone.

"Well now," she said, sizing the stallion up, "who is *this* ?"

"Oh," Fluttershy said, taking his hoof. "Delancey, this is my friend Rarity. Rarity, this is Delancey."

"So, *this* is the Delancey I've heard so much about!" Delancey stiffened as she circled him. "I approve."

"Yeah, he's real cute!"

Delancey yelped as he suddenly found a pink mare with spectacles standing behind him.

"Where did you—?" he asked, glancing around to figure out where she'd come from.

"Hi!" Pinkie said, shaking his hoof rapidly. "I'm Pinkie Pie, one of Fluttershy's best friends as well as her roommate's business partner at least we will be as soon as we open the bakery which we will once Applejack gets back from her family trip in Appleloosa and then we'll be selling pies and cakes and muffins and cupcakes—do you like cupcakes? I *love* cupcakes! I could eat cupcakes all day I could eat chocolate cupcakes and carrot cupcakes and banana—"

"Pinkie!" Rarity cried, severing the hoofshake by stepping between the two. "You shake him any harder and you'll shake him to death!"

Delancey was still jittering from the encounter. Fluttershy had to hold him steady to get him to stop.

"Sorry," she whispered, turning him slightly away from the two mares. "My friends can be a bit…eccentric."

"No problem," Delancey said, clearing his throat. "I *like* eccentric."

Glancing down at his still shaking hoof, he thought, *But even* I *have my limits.*

At the end of the hall was a mic and podium in front of a red velvet curtain. Stepping up to the podium, Mr. Fetlock tapped on the mic to get every pony's attention. The room went quiet as the audience focused to the curator.

"Afternoon, every pony," he said. "Welcome to the unveiling of our

latest addition to our exhibit on Ancient Anugypt. I'm sure you've all heard the rumors that we've had artifacts delivered straight from the tomb of the legendary pharaoh, Amenhooftep! Well, I am here to put those rumors to rest."

He smiled slightly. "They are true."

The audience buzzed with excitement.

"Amen *who* tep?" Delancey whispered to Fluttershy.

"For those of you who are sadly ignorant of the story of Amenhooftep," Mr. Fetlock said with a twinge of annoyance in his tone, "you shall hear it soon. But first, let me give thanks to Miss Twilight Sparkle, CEO of Sparkle Labs, for funding this exhibit. Unfortunately, Miss Sparkle is away on business at the moment, but she is with us in spirit."

There was a humph from the audience. Rarity spotted Starlight Glimmer a short distance away, looking boringly at her hoof.

"She's probably sipping a mojito in Puerto Caballo or something," she muttered to herself.

"And now," Mr. Fetlock said, turning to Rainbow in the front row, "my assistant, Miss Rainbow Dash, shall tell you of the history of King Amenhooftep."

Rainbow's eyes widened in surprise as the audience clapped. Mr. Fetlock had never called on *her* to make a speech. She was completely unprepared! But he had his hoof outstretched to her and was looking at her expectantly, so she couldn't say no.

Gulping, Rainbow stepped up to the podium, not accepting his hoof. Despite this, he politely stepped aside, giving her the microphone. Rainbow started sweating as she looked out at the audience.

Be cool, Rainbow , she thought, tugging nervously at her tie. *You've seen Twilight do this a million times. How hard can it be?*

Twilight…that's it!

Clearing her throat, Rainbow put on a big smile and straightened up.

"A little over two thousand years ago, Amenhooftep, one of Anugypt's last pharaohs, ruled his kingdom with an iron…" She shook her head. "He ruled, uh…cruelly and inconsiderately."

"Why is she talking like that?" Pinkie whispered to Rarity.

"I think she's simply nervous," Rarity replied.

"King Amenhooftep," Rainbow said, wiping the sweat off her brow, "is, uh, most famous for taking so many wives. Little is known about his first six except for a few, uh… *accounts* describing their personalities and, err, social statuses."

Pinkie cocked her head. "Is it just me, or does she sound a bit like Twilight?"

Rainbow looked to her boss for help. She wasn't sure why, as she expected to receive a condescending look. Instead, he held his hoof up, encouraging her to press on. Glancing back at the audience, she caught Fluttershy's eye. The smile she gave her was even more encouraging.

Then she remembered when she and Fluttershy were foals and they used to tell each other stories at sleepovers.

You can do this , Rainbow thought, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. *Just act like you're telling Fluttershy a story.*

When she opened her eyes, her smile became more genuine and more confident. "His first wife had been his sister." She stuck her tongue out. "Yeah, I know, what was with the pharaohs and incest?"

There were chuckles among the audience. Delancey only blinked.

"I don't see what the big deal is," he murmured. "The gods did it all the time."

"And she *was* very beautiful," Rainbow said, "but she was very conceited. Translation: she was *snotty* . And demanding. She would order the slaves around like…well, slaves."

"Reminds me of some pony I know," Rarity whispered to Coco, glancing at their boss.

"She made the mistake of ordering her husband around too," Rainbow continued. "Eventually, Amenhooftep's affections turned to one of his wife's servants, who soon became his second wife. You know, after he," she made a slashing motion across her throat, "his first wife. But after meeting a mare who was even *more* beautiful, he," she made the motion again, "the old servant girl. Stallions, right?"

Many of the mares laughed while several stallions grunted.

"The third wife was intelligent and strong, but her ideas were too forward-thinking for Amenhooftep's taste. She wanted the slaves to be treated as equals."

"And what's wrong with that?" Starlight asked aloud.

"Nothing, of course," Rainbow said, hearing her comment, "except the old kingie didn't like it when he found one of the male slaves in her bedchamber."

"Ooh," the crowd said collectively.

Rainbow made the slashing motion across her throat again. "So Amenhooftep took a wife who was even *more* beautiful, another one of the servants to the queen. That is, until he set his sights on a high priest's even *more* beautiful daughter." Slashing motion again. "But the high priest's daughter was also vain and greedy. Even more so than him. When he discovered she was stealing his treasures under his nose, he…well, you get the picture by now, right?"

There was a chuckle from Mr. Fetlock, which did not escape Rarity's notice. He watched Rainbow from the side, his eyes fixated on her. Rarity could've sworn those eyes were getting bigger from every second he watched her.

"The sixth wife had been a girl from the village. The pharaoh spotted her one day and ordered that she be brought to the palace as his next bride. This poor girl had been the shyest and quietest of all,

which, of course, was no problem for Amenhooftep. But the sixth wife's childhood friend, Neighfertiti, who was also the village's greatest warrior, laid siege to the palace and demanded that her friend be returned! Amenhooftep met her in battle personally, and their duel went on for days, *weeks* some say! When Amenhooftep realized he had met his match, he bowed before Neighfertiti, declared her his equal and asked for her hoof.

"Neighfertiti accepted, for *some* reason," Rainbow muttered this part under her breath. "Something about no pony being able to resist the pharaoh's gaze or something like that. The sixth wife was released and thankfully was spared from execution. As his seventh marriage progressed, Amenhooftep learned to appreciate Neighfertiti not just for her good looks, but her mind and strength. She taught him to see the beauty in all things, not just gold and jewels. But, as karma would have it, Neighfertiti became sick and…well, died."

Fluttershy sighed. "So sad."

"Serves the guy right for being so picky," Delancey murmured. "Why didn't he just devote himself fully to one mare and be done with it?"

"Amenhooftep placed a curse upon himself," Rainbow said, "that he would never find peace until he was reunited with Neighfertiti. As part of this curse, he refused to undergo the mummification process so that he would still look good even as a dead guy wrapped in cloth. Even today, his body is still in perfect condition."

Mr. Fetlock joined her at the podium. "And you can all see for yourself." He nodded to a unicorn security guard standing off to the side. "Every pony, give a warm welcome to…King Amenhooftep!"

The curtain magically fell away, revealing the open sarcophagus. There were several "oohs" and "ahs" as the audience applauded.

"Note the jewels he was put to rest in," Mr. Fetlock said, pointing.

The mummy wore a blue and gold neckpiece with a red stripe in the center, blue and gold bracelets and a matching artificial beard and headdress. In the center of the headdress was a golden cobra head with green jeweled eyes.

"It is said that Pharaoh Amenhooftep never took these accessories off," Mr. Fetlock said, "not even in sleep. Some legends say the cobra headdress has magical properties, with the power to—"

Suddenly, pink magic enveloped the headdress and it poofed out of sight. Every pony gasped.

"What?" Mr. Fetlock cried. "Where did—?"

"There!" Rainbow cried, pointing to a dark-cloaked pony heading for the doorway to the next exhibit.

"Stop, thief!"

Alarmed at being caught, the thief tripped over, her hood falling back from her face.

"Trixie!" Pinkie, Rarity and Rainbow exclaimed.

"Now things are getting interesting," Delancey said, making a bag of popcorn appear.

"No food in my museum!" Mr. Fetlock shouted from the podium.

Yelping, Trixie scrambled to her hooves, picking up the headdress with her magic.

"Do you even know what that thing does?" Rainbow said into the mic.

"Who cares?!" Trixie shouted over her shoulder. "It's shiny, it's potentially powerful and Trixie wants it!"

"Told ya!" Pinkie whispered to Rarity.

"Uh, Fluttershy," Rarity said, turning around. "We should get somewhere…Fluttershy?"

But Fluttershy had already gone off to change.

"Hey, let's get going before she gets more of the action!" Pinkie said.

Fortunately, the crowd was in a hustle after the thief, allowing for

Rarity and Pinkie to slip away. Rainbow, on the other hoof, could not get away so easily, as Mr. Fetlock had grabbed her hoof.

"Come, we mustn't let that thief get away!"

"But Boss," Rainbow cried as she was whisked into the crowd, "shouldn't we let the Power Ponies take care of—?"

"This is *my* museum and I'm not letting another one of our exhibits get destroyed!"

Meanwhile, Trixie was dashing through the sculpture gardens, laughing at the distance between her and the crowd. Suddenly, something obstructed her path, forcing her to stop and fall to the ground.

"Hiya, Trixie!" Fili-Second said, looking down at her. "Ya know, I thought ya already did the cursed Anugyptian artifact thingy, but hey, can't beat a classic, right?"

"Humph!" Trixie grunted, jumping to her hooves. "Your superspeed doesn't intimidate the Great and Powerful Trixie, Fili-Second! It doesn't matter if you're fast enough to catch her. You have to *find* her first!"

Before Fili-Second realized what she was doing, Trixie threw a hoof-full of smoke bombs to the ground. Usually, these only produced a small cloud of smoke, but this time, the cloud was big enough to fill the entire garden.

"Whoa!" Fili-Second coughed as she squinted through the smoke. "Did ya get an upgrade from the Evil Gadget Store or something?"

"Something like that!" Trixie cackled through the smog.

Deciding she'd have an easier chance of finding Trixie this way, Fili-Second started zooming blindly around the garden. Unfortunately, this only led to her colliding into statues.

As Mr. Fetlock, with Rainbow in tow, approached the fogged-up garden, he stopped upon hearing the sounds of smashing stone.

"No!" he cried, dropping Rainbow's hoof and rushing into the smog. "Not my statues!"

This was Rainbow's chance to slip away and change into Zapp.

In the meantime, Trixie had snuck out of the fog and into the Reneighssance Art exhibit.

"Not so fast, Trixie!" Radiance called, flying in on her pink carpet. "That exquisite headpiece does not belong to you!"

"The old geezer's dead!" Trixie shouted. "He's not using it!" Using her magic, she placed the headdress on her head. "Looks better on me any—whoa!" She had to stop running a moment to rebalance herself. "Heavier than it looks."

"Here," Radiance said, pointing her glowing bracelets at her to summon a hook above Trixie's head. "Allow me to lighten the—ah!"

As soon as the hook appeared, her carpet vanished from beneath her hooves. She had to summon a trampoline to catch herself.

"Pardon me," Radiance said sheepishly. "I still haven't quite figured out how to summon multiple constructs at once."

Snickering, Trixie turned around to make a run for it, but Zapp was hovering in her way.

"The sign said," Zapp said, swiping her back hoof beneath Trixie's legs to knock her off-balance, "'Do Not Touch!'"

"And the sign on the door said," Trixie said, illuminating her horn to entrap Zapp in her magic, "'This Museum Is Open to the *Public!*'"

Using her magic, she flung Zapp across the room, right into one of the paintings. Zapp gasped when she saw what her wing had torn through.

"Aw man, not a Bridlecelli! Fetlock's gonna kill me!"

"Don't worry, Rainbow!" Saddle Rager called, stomping into the room. "I won't let her hurt any of you!"

By this time, part of the crowd had come through the doorway, Delancey included. His pupils dilated at the sight of Saddle Rager. When Zapp saw Saddle Rager's eyes glowing red, she gasped, knowing what a transformation in a building of fragile historical artifacts would entail.

"Saddle Rager, don't!" Zapp shouted. "Don't get…"

Saddle Rager roared as she grew in size.

"…mad," Zapp squeaked.

Remembering what had happened last time Saddle Rager had transformed in front of her, Trixie squealed and scrambled into a run. The giant caught up to her in just a few steps, picked her up and started tossing her from side to side like a ragdoll.

"What a mare!" Delancey exclaimed, shoving a hoof-full of popcorn into his mouth.

"Okay, okay!" Trixie said, using her magic to hoist the headdress off. "Uncle, uncle!"

Gasping, Zapp rushed to catch the headdress. She sighed in relief as it landed in her hooves in time.

But Saddle Rager wasn't done with Trixie. Pressing her into a tiny ball, she threw the thief through the doorway leading to the next exhibit.

"Saddle Rager, no!" Zapp cried. "That's the—!"

She winced at the sound of shattering glass.

"…Ancient Chineighse glassware exhibit."

The security guards ran down the hall to apprehend Trixie. Mr. Fetlock soon followed. As soon as he saw the state of the painting and the glassware, his mouth fell open in shock.

"W-W-What…?"

Zapp flapped her wings. "Mr. Fetlock, calm down."

"What…?"

"We got the headdress, don't worry! And we caught the—"

Spinning around, he shouted in her face, "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY MUSEUM?!"

Zapp jumped back. "W-We're sorry! But hey, we stopped Trixie and, uh, look! We got the headdress!"

He snatched the headdress out of her hooves, his glare as sharp as daggers.

"Get out," he said through his teeth.

"Mr. Fetlock, I—"

"GET OUT!" he bellowed, pointing to the doorway. "GET OUT OF MY MUSEUM!"

The Power Ponies didn't have to be told again. Zapp picked up Radiance while Radiance used her bracelets to create a tow truck to drag the still transformed Saddle Rager away. Fili-Second zipped into the room.

"Hey! Smoke finally cleared! What did I miss?" Mr. Fetlock's eyes darted towards her. "Uh, okay, guess our work here is done. Bye!"

As the heroes made their hasty exit, Delancey laughed at how Saddle Rager writhed to get out of Radiance's tow cable.

"Oh, ho, ho, that was so *chaotic* !"

He reached into his popcorn bag only to discover that he'd eaten it all. Shrugging, he popped the bag into his mouth and began to chew.

"Wasn't that amazing, Fluttershy?" he asked with his mouth full.

When no reply came, Delancey swallowed and looked around.

"Fluttershy? Fluttershy?"

After a few minutes of searching for her in the crowd, he realized what must've happened.

Fluttershy, frightened of the thief, had left the museum. He slapped himself in the forehead for not having kept a closer eye on her. He'd been too engrossed in the spectacle. Engrossed in Saddle Rager.

And the award for worst boyfriend goes to…

"Well," Rainbow said, slamming down her beer, "that could've gone better."

After Saddle Rager had calmed down, the four mares had decided to reconvene at a bar and drown out their most recent failure in a bit of drink. Fluttershy, who didn't drink, was satisfied with drowning in a club soda.

"Admittedly, it could have," Rarity said, sipping her martini, "but at least we caught Trixie before she could get away with the headdress."

"And destroyed half the museum!" Rainbow flopped her face onto the counter. "It's times like this I'm glad we have the whole secret identity thing, otherwise I'd be fired right now. I've never seen Fetlock so upset! I mean he's always been cranky, but he's never kicked ponies out of his museum like that before!"

"Sorry I broke those statues," Pinkie said once she'd finished chugging her beer.

"And I'm sorry I broke all that glass," Fluttershy said softly, twirling the umbrella in her club soda.

"I don't blame you guys," Rainbow said. "You couldn't see where you were going, Pinkie. And Flutters, you're never conscious during your transformations. I should've led you guys better."

"This isn't your fault either, Rainbow," Rarity said. "It's certain that

we were a little…disorganized, today, but we were in an intense situation and didn't have much time to think."

Rainbow groaned. "Kinda missing Mare-velous' lectures about being more careful and thinking before you act. I just hope Mr. Fetlock cools down before our dinner tomorrow."

Rarity paused with the rim of her glass only an inch from her lips as she looked at her friend. "Dinner, you say?"

"Oh, yeah. Boss invited me to dinner to go over some ideas for new exhibits. I'll bet he's gonna wanna talk about *fixing* them too."

Rarity turned her head towards her curiously. "Your boss invited you to dinner?"

"Yeah, at some restaurant. *Hisan's* , I think it's called."

Spitting out her drink, Rarity nearly dropped her glass. " *Hisan's* ? That Mountiterranean five-star restaurant? Rainbow Dash, that place is *expensive* ! I should know, Coco used to make reservations there for Suri!"

"Really?" Rainbow said, reaching for her beer. "Good thing I'm not paying then."

"Darling, your employer is taking you to an expensive five-star restaurant. I don't think you understand what this means."

Rainbow shrugged. "It means I'm getting a free dinner."

She was about to sip her beer when Rarity grabbed her face and turned it towards her.

"Rainbow," Rarity said, locking eyes with her, "let me speak plainly. I believe Mr. Fetlock has romantic intentions towards you."

After keeping her gaze for several seconds, Rainbow burst out laughing.

"Mr. Fetlock?" she said, slamming the counter with her hoof. " *Romantic intentions* ? Get out!"

"I'm serious, Rainbow Dash," Rarity said, annoyed at her response.

"Have you *met* the guy? He doesn't have a romantic bone in his body! He doesn't even like the Romantic *period* , with a capital 'R!'"

When she saw that Rarity wasn't laughing, Rainbow finally stopped.

"Aw come on, Rarity! The guy *hates* me!"

"Not with the way he was looking at you today," the unicorn said, sipping her drink.

"What are you talking about?"

"He couldn't keep his eyes off you during your entire speech."

" *Every pony* was looking at me, Rares! I was giving a speech! So what if he was looking at me? That doesn't mean he *loves* me or anything! Besides, he's like twice my age!"

"You're both adults, that's all that matters. Now, it is not my place to interfere in your love *or* work life, but I would advise you to exercise a little caution when getting romantically involved with your employer."

"I'm *not* dating him! We're just having dinner! To talk business!"

"That may be how you see it, darling, but how does *he* see it?"

"Business! He's my boss, and he's *not* in love with me! End of story!"

Sighing, Rarity replied, "If you say so."

"Mr. Fetlock in love with me," Rainbow grumbled, taking another swig of her beer. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Due to the severe damages, the museum had to close early. The building was empty, save for a few security guards and a cleaning crew. In the Anugypt exhibit however, Mr. Fetlock was all alone. He sniffed as he carefully replaced the headdress atop the mummy's

head.

"My sincerest apologies, your majesty," he said, taking a step back. "That thief had no respect for your treasures." He snorted. "Neither did those neglectful, vandalizing, so-called heroes!"

He stomped away and looked wistfully down the hall of artifacts and hieroglyphs.

"No pony values this place like I do," he said softly. "Except maybe Miss Dash." He sighed at the thought of her. "You know I never quite realized how…enthusiastic she was about history until yesterday. She reminds me a bit of myself when I was her age."

Hanging his head, he said, "Of course, that was back before I realized that so few ponies treasured history the way I did." He turned back to the mummy. "Do you have any idea how many vandals I've had in here? How many thieves have broken in? How many curious little brats have reached out to touch my beautiful exhibits?!"

Grunting in anger, he prepared to stomp his hoof on the floor, but stopped as he was afraid he might crack the beautiful finish. Sighing, he set his hoof gently down.

"And now I have those Power Ponies to deal with. They come bursting in to stop a robbery, only to make it worse! A Bridlecelli masterpiece, five thousands-year-old statues, twenty priceless pieces of Chineighse glass, destroyed! If I had power like theirs, I would try to protect this museum rather than destroy it!"

His eyes focused on the mummy's headdress. "I would not have another one of these beautiful treasures taken from me."

Just then, the emerald eyes of the cobra carved into the headdress started glowing. Thinking he was seeing things, Mr. Fetlock stepped closer to the headdress and squinted. He heard a voice in a foreign language. He recognized it as Coptic, the spoken language of Ancient Anugypt. His Coptic was a bit rusty, but he could've sworn it was saying: *Give me life and share my soul.*

There was a flash of green light, causing Mr. Fetlock to shield his eyes, cry out and step back. He was still for a moment, until he lowered his hooves. The whites of his eyes flashed green as his lips curled into a malicious smile.

That evening, the employees of Polomare Fashions were enjoying Happy Hour at a bar. Suri sat with Coco Pommel in a booth in the corner, her eyes searching the room.

"Where is Rarity?" Suri demanded. "I wanted to go over her latest designs for the new Ancient Anugypt line! Coco, you're her roommate, where is she?!"

"Oh, um," Coco said, biting her lip. "She was, um, traumatized from the incident at the museum that she, uh, needed some time alone to recover."

Of course, Rarity was really on monitor duty at Headquarters.

Suri rolled her eyes. "Some ponies can be so lazy, 'kay?" She slammed her hoof on the table. "Now get me a scotch, on the rocks!"

Coco jumped. "B-B-But…I'm not your assistant anymore."

Suri's eyes narrowed. "But I'm *still* your boss and *still* get to decide who at my company keeps their job and who doesn't. So, I will say again," she thrust her muzzle into Coco's face, "get me a scotch, on the rocks!"

"Yes, Miss Polomare!" Coco squeaked, leaping up from the table.

Groaning, Suri leaned her elbow onto the table and placed her chin in her hoof. A second later, a glass of scotch with ice was placed in front of her.

"That was fast."

But when she looked up, she found a server rather than Coco.

"From the gentlecolt over there," he said, tilting his head towards the bar.

Suri looked over to the bar and locked eyes with the stallion sitting there. Liking what she saw, she grinned and stood up.

A few minutes later, Coco returned with Suri's scotch, but was surprised not to find her employer there.

"Miss Polomare?" she asked, looking around. "Miss Polomare?"

"What a shame," said a voice.

Gasping, Coco spun around to find a stallion holding out some bits to her.

"So sorry your employer was troubling you. This should cover the drink."

With a blush, Coco accepted the bits.

"It can be stressful when your mistress doesn't appreciate you."

Coco looked down at her hooves. "I wouldn't call her my mistress, but…yes, it *can* be a bit…difficult."

"Why don't you join me for a drink and tell me all about it?"

Once Coco met his green eyes again, she found that she couldn't say no.

At Glimmer Industries, Starlight Glimmer was at her desk, giving orders to a white earth stallion wearing a headset and holding a tablet.

"Double Diamond," Starlight said in a commanding yet gentle tone, "move my appointment with Dr. Hugger to Monday and call the prison in Canterlot, make sure the bail money went through."

"I'll get right on it, Starlight," Double Diamond said, making notes

with his stylus while keeping up his big smile.

"And did we get those body wash lawsuits taken care of?" Starlight asked, leaning back in her chair while playfully levitating some pencils.

"All twenty-seven of them, Starlight!"

"And the…unexpected side effects?"

"No leaks to the press, Starlight!"

"Excellent work." She put down the pencils and started stapling some papers. "Once you've made those calls, Double Diamond, you can take the rest of the night off."

His smile became wider as he left the room. "Thank you, Starlight!"

The double doors automatically slid open to let him out.

" *Starlight!* " a sweet voice said through the intercom on Starlight's desk. " *There's a Miss Abacus on Line One for you.* "

Starlight pressed the button. "Thank you, Sugar Belle."

She heard a small giggle.

"Is there a joke you would like to share, Sugar Belle?"

" *No one!* " Sugar Belle replied hastily. " *I mean nothing, Starlight!* "

Shrugging it off, Starlight picked up the phone. "Hey, it's me."

Her usual cheerful tone had dropped to a more serious one, as did her expression as she listened to her caller.

"Not to worry, I've taken care of Miss Sweet," Starlight said, turning her chair towards the wide window to look out at the cityscape. "She'll be out soon."

She was so focused on the conversation that she didn't hear the automatic doors slide open.

"Yes, we're quite sure. The doctor is sure. She's even admitted it on the news. When? Oh, it'll be soon. Unfortunately, the only ingredient we need hasn't been seen for days," she said, turning her chair back, "and the Blood Moon isn't for another—hey, who let you in he—?"

She trailed off as she locked gaze with the intruder.

" *Hello?* " a female voice asked on the phone. " *Are you still there?* "

Smiling, Starlight said, "I'll call you back," and gently lowered the phone back onto the hook.

Trixie sat in her cell in Balkham Asylum, reading an article in the evening paper about her failed heist. Furious, she crumpled the paper into a ball with her magic and threw it against the wall.

"Stupid Power Ponies," she grumbled. "Why must they always foil Trixie's brilliant plans?!"

Just then, the alarm sounded, causing Trixie to jump. Sounds of confusion were coming from the other cells.

"What is going on out there?" Trixie demanded, peering through the glass. "Excuse me! But some of us are trying to lament here!"

"You won't have to lament for much longer," a male voice said.

To her surprise, the glass door went up and her savior stepped into view.

"Well," Trixie said, cocking her head. " *You're* the last pony I'd expect."

Before anyone else calls me out for being up late, my new job has me working night shifts, so I've developed a nocturnal schedule.

Horse puns:

Mountiterranean=Mediterranean ("mount" for mounting your horse)

Hisan=Arabic for "horse" (current spoken language in Egypt)

Reneighssance=Renaissance

Bridlecelli=Botticelli (Renaissance painter)

The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 3

" *If you can't figure out where you stand with someone, it might be time to stop standing and start walking."*

- Unknown

Saddle Rager used to hate patrolling Maretropolis alone, especially at night. However, since she'd grown accustomed to her powers, she was less afraid of getting mugged. Besides, a fly in the night air was just was she needed to reflect on the dreams she'd been having.

It was strange. She hadn't even seen Discord in almost two months until yesterday, and she was having heated dreams about him. And even though she'd been with Delancey all this time, she had yet to dream about him.

Delancey! She had only just realized she had left him at the museum without explanation! *I'll have to call him tomorrow. I'm sure he'll believe me if I say I got lost in the confusion.*

She felt bad. Dreaming about Discord when she was with another. True, it wasn't a crime to *dream* about someone else, but what would Delancey say if he knew she was attracted, even if only slightly, to the ancient God of Chaos? And it would be hard to explain that without explaining her connection to Discord, as well as her part-time job.

No, Delancey could *not* know she was Saddle Rager. Not only might her monstrous form scare him away, but he could be in danger. She could only imagine what Discord would do if he discovered she was dating someone who wasn't him. After seeing his less flattering side the other night, she was beginning to think he wasn't as nice with other ponies as he was with Fluttershy, especially with romantic rivals! Discord didn't own her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try anything.

It was almost time to hand the patrol off to Zapp when an alarm sounded from the bank down the street. Flapping her wings harder, Saddle Rager flew over to the bank. She tried the front door, but it was locked. For a moment, she feared she would have to break the glass when the door suddenly opened for her. Confused, but deciding now wasn't the time to question it, she went in.

She flew over to the vault and gasped when she saw the perpetrator.

There he was, leaning nonchalantly against the round, heavy, metal door, his cloven hoof standing within the laser tripwire.

"D-Discord?" Saddle Rager said, utterly baffled at this scene.

The draconequus checked a stopwatch in his paw. "Responded in thirty-point-two seconds. Not too shabby."

She blinked several times. "W-What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" As he shrugged, a moneybag materialized in his claw. "I'm robbing this bank."

Saddle Rager looked between the moneybag and him. "What do *you* need money for? You're a god!"

"Oh, that's right." He made the bag disappear. "Guess that means I was just trying to get your attention then."

"Attention?"

"Of course, I could've just gone back to your place, but I thought that'd be too predictable."

"Predictable?"

Discord swabbed his ear with his talon. "Is there an echo in here?"

" *Hello, Fluttershy?* " Radiance's voice said through the commlink. " *Have you checked out that bank alarm on 5 th Street?* "

Sighing, Saddle Rager pressed her hoof into her ear and responded,

"False alarm, Radiance. It's only Discord."

" *Discord?!* " Radiance exclaimed in astonishment.

" *Only* Discord?!" the god said, putting his paw to his heart. "Now, *that's* just insulting! You saying I'm not threatening enough for you, Miss Saddle Rager?"

Saddle Rager narrowed her eyes, not pleased with his behavior. "Well, to be plain, you *did* just trip a burglar alarm for no reason whatsoever, except that you are apparently desperate for attention as well as for something to occupy your time with!"

Annoyed, as well as amused, by her retort, Discord placed his paw and claw firmly on his hips. "I'll have you know that surprising as it may seem, my life is not *completely* devoid of social interaction! I have a girlfriend!"

Saddle Rager's mouth fell open. *Does he really think I'm his girlfriend when I firmly told him no?* She couldn't think of a response without revealing her identity.

"Am I annoying you, Miss Saddle Rager?" Discord said with a smirk. "Am I getting you…angry?"

She grunted. " *Peeved* —pardon my language—would be a better word for it."

"Uh-oh, how unwise of me to unleash your wrath." Closing his eyes, he put his paw dramatically to his forehead. "Guess you'll have to fight me now."

Opening one eye, he watched her expectantly. It took only a few seconds for the situation to dawn on Saddle Rager.

"Wait," she said. "Do you… *want* me to fight you?"

"Oh, very well, if you insist!"

With a snap of his fingers, Saddle Rager suddenly found herself in a boxing ring with blue boxing gloves on her hooves. Discord appeared in front of her, wearing red boxing shorts and gloves.

Another Discord appeared between them in a referee's uniform.

Pulling down a mic from out of nowhere, the referee pointed to Saddle Rager and said, "In this corner, standing four-foot-three—*fifty* feet, when you get on her bad side—the fearsome, the destructive, the *lovely* …Saddle Rager!"

Applause erupted from an undeterminable source. Saddle Rager glanced around for that source in vain.

"And in this corner," the referee said, pointing to Discord, "Standing ten-foot-seven and three-quarters—fifteen and a half if you count his tail and horns, although his size varies too—the Master of Mischief, the Spirit of Chaos, the Hunk of Handsomeness, the one, the only, Discord!"

Discord clasped his gloves together and waved them as the invisible audience clapped.

"And here comes Round One," the referee said as another Discord dressed in a pink swimsuit pranced across the ring holding a sign that read "Round One." "And…fight!"

Saddle Rager lost it the moment the bell rang. "No!"

The referee poofed out of sight and Discord looked at her in surprise. "No?"

"No!" she shouted, throwing her gloves down. "This…this is ridiculous!"

"Okay, I'll admit the me in the girly swimsuit was a bit much—I mean it hardly complimented my figure—"

"I'm not going to fight you, Discord!"

"Why not? I'm a villain, aren't I?"

Saddle Rager grunted impatiently as she waved her hooves about. "You're not even *doing* anything!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was tripping the alarm not enough for you? Am I

going to have to go through the whole spiel first?"

In a flash, the boxing ring was gone and Discord was in a black-and-white-striped burglar outfit and black mask. He held up several moneybags in his claw and a Tommy gun in his paw.

"Stick 'em up!" he said in a Manehattan accent.

Facehoofing herself, Saddle Rager tried to calm down, but found it rather difficult.

"Discord," she said slowly, "I understand if you are…wanting entertainment since I…since *Fluttershy* left you—"

Discord stiffened. "She didn't leave me! We're just…on a break!"

She gritted her teeth to prevent herself from shouting. "But I *really* don't have time for this. So, if you would please return that money to the vault, I will be on my way." Turning away from him, she took a deep breath and said, "Good night."

Discord's jaw dropped as she started trotting away from him.

"W-Wha…who…wha…what kind of hero are you?!"

Instead of responding, she just kept on walking. Exasperated, Discord dropped the money and gun.

"Fine," he said, ripping off the mask. "I didn't want it to come to this, but you've left me no choice."

A second later, Saddle Rager felt a sudden tug on her tail, making her yelp. Covering her tail, she spun around to find Discord floating on his back, whistling nonchalantly with his hands behind his head.

"Did…did you just pull my tail?"

Shrugging innocently, he replied, "Wasn't me."

Just then, she felt something yank her mane back so far, her head went with it. Squealing, she turned just in time to see Discord's floating, disembodied claw, which hastily flew back to reattach to his

eagle arm.

"Ugh!" Saddle Rager exclaimed, stomping her front hooves to the ground. "Sweet Celestia, you are so… *childish* !"

Her voice had gotten lower with the last word, causing Discord's ears to perk up excitedly.

"Yes, yes!" he said, holding his paw and claw out urgently. "I am *so* childish! Makes you mad, doesn't it?"

Saddle Rager grunted as she grew in size. "Get…out…of…this… bank! Now!"

He stuck out his tongue. "Make me—oomph!"

He was cut off by Saddle Rager's now enormous hoof squeezing around his waist. He was brought up to meet her monstrous, snarling face.

"Wow," he uttered, smiling in awe. "This is even more terrifying than when I annoyed that Cyclops!"

"GET OUT!" Saddle Rager hollered in his face.

Discord licked his lion finger to put his winded mane back in place. "You think you could throw me around first or—?"

"NOW!" she boomed even louder.

"Okay, okay!" he said, holding up his paw. "I can see when I'm not wanted. Same time tomorrow then?"

She let out a growl not unlike the rumble of an earthquake.

"Right. Going. Tootles!"

He snapped his fingers hastily. Now that the source of her anger was gone, it took less than a minute for Saddle Rager to shrink down. Though no longer furious, she was still breathing heavily from irritation.

"Gods, I wish I never let him out of that statue!"

Rarity had been grateful that Spike had let her rest for at least a few hours by taking over monitor duty, but he had been so insistent on not waking her that she was late for work! She burst into the office, her mane in disarray. Many heads turned from their cubicles as she rushed past. When she arrived at her office, she noticed the assistant's desk in front of it was empty.

"Stiletto?" Rarity said, turning to the nearest employee. "Where's Coco?"

Platform Stiletto was a cream-colored earth mare with yellow eyes and a wild purple mane. She sat in her cubicle drawing some shoe designs.

"How should I know?" Stiletto replied bitterly without facing her. "Isn't she *your* roommate?"

As Rarity rolled her eyes, Suri's assistant came up behind her. She was a skinny pink earth mare with gray eyes and a blonde mane in a spaghetti-like ponytail.

"Miss Belle! Thank goodness you've come!"

"Miss Dressmacher!" Rarity exclaimed, spinning around. "Yes, yes, I know I'm late. Tell Suri that I overslept but it won't happen again."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Miss Dressmacher said.

"Then tell her I got stuck in traffic or—"

"No, you see, I can't do that because Miss Polomare hasn't come in today."

Rarity blinked. "Is she on holiday or something?"

The assistant shook her head. "She never asked me to schedule any trips, and I've been calling her home phone and cell all morning."

Looking at the empty desk, Rarity asked, "Has Coco called?"

"No, she hasn't come in either. What do you think we should do?"

"Why are you asking me?"

Miss Dressmacher cocked her head. "You're the Vice President. With Suri away, that leaves you in charge."

Rarity stiffened as she looked between Suri's office and Coco's desk. Normally, she would be leaping for joy at this opportunity to call all the shots, but she had to solve this mystery first, especially if her best friend was in trouble.

"Um, Surprise Company Holiday!" Rarity shouted to the room. "Every pony, take the rest of the day off!"

Without question, the employees cheered and hustled out of the room. A few ponies, such as Miss Dressmacher and Platform Stiletto gave her curious looks before they left.

Once she was alone, Rarity let out a troubled sigh and pressed her hoof into her ear. "Radiance to Power Ponies. Meet me at Headquarters. Something very peculiar is afoot."

"You sure your boss isn't just playing hooky or something?" Rainbow asked once Rarity had finished explaining the situation at Headquarters.

"No," Rarity replied, shaking her head. "Suri may do some questionable things, but she never takes time off without giving notice. Even if she did, it doesn't explain Coco's disappearance."

"Maybe she slept in like you and is back at her apartment?" Pinkie suggested.

"I already checked there, and I've called her cell several times! I'm worried some foul play might be at hoof here."

"But who would want to hurt your boss and Coco?" Fluttershy asked.

Rarity huffed. "I know a *lot* of ponies who'd want to get back at Suri, but you've all met Coco. She's never offended any pony in her life!"

"Maybe it's some pony who's got a grudge against Polomare Fashions and is just picking off employees one by one?" Rainbow said.

"Our company *does* have plenty of rivals in the fashion industry."

"It might not just be Polomare fashions," Spike said from the monitors. "Come look at this."

The mares walked up to the monitors, which had a window opened to a news article titled: "Local Billionaire Vanishes!" Below the title was a picture of Starlight Glimmer next to one of a pink unicorn with a curly purple mane.

"According to this article," Spike said, scrolling down, "Starlight Glimmer, the richest and most powerful businessmare in Maretropolis—next to Twilight—and her secretary, Sugar Belle, disappeared from Glimmer Industries last night. At least that's what they think happened, because they never clocked out of their shifts last night. Same story as Suri and Coco: they didn't show up at the office this morning, hadn't given notice, and didn't respond to any calls made by Starlight's assistant. That's when he reported them missing."

"So, what?" Rainbow said. "Some pony's kidnapping big-shot business ponies and their secretaries?"

"Coco's not a secretary," Rarity insisted, "and she's not Suri's assistant anymore."

"That's not the only big news," Spike said, pulling up a second article.

Every pony gasped at the title: "Great and Powerful Trixie Escapes Again!"

"Seriously!" Rainbow shouted. "Balkham needs to upgrade its security!"

"So *Trixie* kidnapped Suri, Coco and those other two?" Rarity asked.

"Nah," Pinkie said, shaking her head. "That doesn't sound like Trixie."

"Pinkie's right," Spike said. "Trixie's a thief, not a kidnapper."

"There's a first time for everything," Rarity said.

"But this article says some pony *else* broke into Balkham and got her out."

"Who'd wanna spring *Trixie* ?" Rainbow said.

"The guards said all they remember is some pony walked in, they're not sure who, and asked them to turn off the security cameras and let them through. A few seconds later, they realized their mistake and sounded the alarm, but it was already too late. The intruder had gotten ahold of a guard's security pass and let Trixie out."

"Hypnotism?" Rarity wondered.

"The Sirens?" Fluttershy said.

"Sonata?!" Pinkie said excitedly.

"No way," Rainbow said. "They got sucked into a vortex to some demon island or whatever."

"I guess you're right." Pinkie sighed sadly. "Besides, Sonata would've called me if she was back in town."

Rarity and Rainbow rolled their eyes at Pinkie's absurd crush.

"So, what do we do?" Rarity asked.

Rainbow looked around as she suddenly found all eyes on her. "What?"

"Um…you're the acting leader?" Rarity said.

"Oh!" Rainbow bit her lip. "Um…" She flapped her wings as she paced around the room, trying to think of what Twilight would do.

"Well, uh…we could look at…security footage?"

Spike shook his head and pointed to the news article on screen. "The intruder had turned the cameras off, remember?"

"Ah, right. Well, uh…we should…see how all the victims are connected?" She gasped. "Two of them are business mares and the other two are, or were, their assistants!"

Unimpressed, Rarity crossed her forelegs over her chest. "We've already established that, darling."

Blushing, Rainbow scratched her head for more ideas. "We could, uh…research! Yeah, research! You know, we could find the villain's hideout by looking up their past hangouts and childhood home—"

"Oh, brilliant!" Rarity exclaimed sarcastically. "Except we don't know who the villain is yet!"

"Right." Chuckling nervously, Rainbow said, "Knew that. Okay, we'll just, um…go to that villain club and see if any pony knows anything?"

"Can't," Spike said. "Mare-velous is sure they moved shop since she and I got caught sneaking in there."

"Although," Rarity said, tapping her chin, "there are some villains we *can* interrogate. Trixie isn't the only inmate at Balkham Asylum. One of the others was sure to have seen what happened."

"Uh, not to sound like a party pooper or anything," Pinkie said, raising her hoof, "but I don't think the goons we got locked up will be willing to talk to us."

"Maybe, but there *is* one inmate at Balkham who just *might* talk to Rarity Belle."

The heroes didn't need to ask to whom she was referring, as they all had a pretty good guess.

"You sure, Rarity?" Spike asked nervously. "The two of you didn't exactly part on good terms."

"It's the only lead we have," Rarity said. "It's worth a try."

"Yeah!" Rainbow exclaimed, pointing at her. "Err, great idea, Rarity! You go down to the asylum while the rest of us stay here and see if we can find anything else. Luckily, the museum's closed so I don't have to come in today." She muttered under her breath, "Glad *some* good came out of yesterday's fiasco." She turned to the dragon. "Spike, how do we get ahold of the police chief? She *always* gives Twilight good tips."

"Err, yeah, see…" Spike twiddled his fingers. "I tried that, and… Chief Spitfire wasn't really comfortable with giving confidential information to a minor."

"What? But you work for the Power Ponies!"

"I'm still a kid!"

"Ugh! Get the chief on the phone or whatever you do!"

While Spike dialed a number on the Power Ponies' hotline, Rarity headed for the elevator.

"Yes, hello?" Rainbow said into the phone. "This is Zapp. I was wondering if you could give us any info into last night's disappearances and Trixie's breakout."

Fluttershy looked around at her friends. "Um, if you don't need me here, there's something I need to—"

"What do you mean you're not at liberty to divulge that information?! I'm talking to the chief, right?"

"Uh, I'll just be going now."

"Well, do you know when she'll be *back* ?!"

Fluttershy slowly backed away as Rainbow grew more and more frustrated.

" *Zapp* ! With two p's? Third-in-command of the Power Ponies?" She nearly dropped the phone. "What do you mean *hold* ?! You never

put the Matter-Horn on hold! Listen here Mr. Receptionist or whoever you are, I'm every bit just as important as the Matter— hello? Hello? Aw, forget it!"

She slammed the phone back onto the hook. "Spike, hack something!"

"Hack what?" the dragon asked with a shrug.

Rainbow cried out in exasperation. "I don't know! The police database or the asylum's database or something! Just hack us some information that will magically solve this case, alright?!"

Jumping in his chair, Spike went to work, his fingers flying across the keyboard.

Rarity took a deep breath as she sat down on the stool and waited in front of the glass. She tried to hone out the chatter of the other visitors talking to inmates through the phones. Every second she waited, she grew more and more anxious.

Come now, Rarity, you only saw her a few days ago when you took her back here.

But this wasn't the same as hauling a criminal to Balkham. She wasn't Radiance at the moment. She was Rarity Belle, just a run-of-the-mill unicorn.

Then she heard the rattle of chains and watched as the object of her visit came into view. Her mane and tail were wrapped in chains, making the heaviest, most unflattering green braids. As her red and green eyes met Rarity's blue ones, she grinned eerily, sat down and picked up the phone. Hesitantly, Rarity used her magic to levitate the phone to her ear.

"Rarity," the Mane-iac said with a slight chuckle, "I *knew* you still cared."

"Hello, Dee," Rarity said dryly. "You're looking well, all things considered."

"As are you. Then again," the villain said, tapping on the glass between them, "you're not in the *nut house* !"

Rarity looked down at the Mane-iac's prison garb. "At least they aren't making you wear those hideous orange jumpsuits these prisons are famous for."

"Yes, at least that's *some* consolation," the Mane-iac said. "Orange never really *was* my color, even *before* my accident." She pulled on the front of her maroon jumpsuit. "Isn't it nice that it's the same color as the one *you* made me a little while ago?"

Rarity lowered her gaze a moment.

"Something tells me you didn't come down here just to say hello," the Mane-iac said, a twinge of disappointment entering her sultry voice.

"Whatever would make you think that?" Rarity asked, not even attempting to sound innocent.

"Well, our last meeting was…unpleasant."

The unicorn met her eyes with a scowl. "You mean after you kidnapped me and attempted to murder my friend? And don't think I didn't hear about that Hairspray Ray of Doom stunt you tried to pull last month!"

"I *was* going to spare you from the blast," the Mane-iac said, "but you weren't at your apartment or your office."

Rarity bit her lip to prevent herself from revealing that she'd been one of the ponies to stop that Hairspray Ray of Doom from causing every pony's mane in Maretropolis to go wild. In fact, she was to be one of its first test subjects.

The villain's smile dropped when her old friend didn't respond. "Let's be serious, Rarity. Why are you here?"

Sighing, Rarity decided to cut to the chase. "It's my friend, Coco. You remember her," she said venomously, "the mare you threatened to blow up if I didn't make your ridiculous henchpony

uniforms?"

"Ah, yes." The Mane-iac's grin returned. "How is the old dear?"

"She's vanished. Not that *you* would care."

"Not particularly."

"She's not the only one. My employer's gone too, as is Starlight Glimmer and her assistant."

"Glimmer's vanished?" The Mane-iac laughed. "I never thought I'd see the day when she'd annoy some pony so much with her unnatural niceness that she would fall victim to foul play! This is an enjoyable bit of gossip, Rarity, but why tell me all of this?"

Rarity leaned forward. "All four mares disappeared last night, the same night a certain fellow inmate of yours disappeared from her cell."

"Oh, yes, that Trixie girl." She huffed. "Didn't particularly care for her. Talked about herself *way* too much. And who in the world constantly refers to themselves in the third person?"

"Well, I don't know if Trixie took them all or if the pony who helped her break out did, but I know her escape is related to Coco's disappearance in some way. So please, Dee, if you saw or heard anything that night, please tell me."

The Mane-iac chuckled. "And why should I? Not even the *police* could get any of us to talk. You know why?" She shot forward, making Rarity jump as she pressed her face against the glass. "There is *nothing* any pony can do to make us cooperate when we've already hit *rock bottom* !"

"Not even the possibility of a lighter sentence?" Rarity asked, her voice squeaking slightly.

"Ha!" She pulled back from the glass. "Why cut a few years off my sentence when I can already bust out of here whenever I like? Have you *seen* the security system in this place? Pathetic!"

Rarity made a mental note to have a talk with the warden later as Radiance. "You'd be doing the right thing, Dee."

Rolling her eyes, the Mane-iac replied, "I didn't become a successful business mare by *doing the right thing* ."

"And *not* doing the right thing caused you to lose your company, give you the most extreme makeover in the history of Equestria, and landed you in this dusty old prison with no taste in interior decorating!"

The villain blinked. "Touché, Rarity. Touché."

Taking a deep breath, Rarity bravely looked her in the eye. "We were friends once, Dee. You once gave me a pair of diamond bracelets for no reason at all."

"Yes, and then you used them to throw me into the slammer."

The unicorn nearly dropped the phone. Seeing her shock, the Mane-iac simply groaned.

"Oh, come now, Rarity. What idiot do you take me for? I don't know how you managed to pull that doppelganger trick at the Charity Ball, but we both know those bracelets didn't just *happen* to fall into the hooves of some *other* random white unicorn with exquisitely curled purple hair."

Gulping, Rarity spoke lower into the phone. "H-How long have you known?"

The Mane-iac shrugged. "Some months now. I've had a long time to think in this place."

"And yet," the unicorn said, studying the villain's face carefully, "you haven't told any pony."

"And give some *other* villain the pleasure of destroying you?"

"Now, see, Dee, I find that hard to believe, considering the *last* time you escaped, you didn't come looking for me."

The Mane-iac's expression became anxious, which caused Rarity to smirk in triumph.

"Isn't that just dandy? Even after knowing I was the one who put you here, I'm still the only friend you have left in this miserable town." Rarity frowned. "Unlike you, Dee, I have other friends, and one of them might be in danger. So, please," she leaned forward, looking at the Mane-iac with big, pleading eyes, "if you know anything, anything at all, tell me now. Prove to me that you still care for me, Dee, and…Radiance might have a little chat with the warden."

The Mane-iac stared at her a long while, appearing to be deep in thought. Then she looked down at her hooficure, trying to give the impression that she didn't care.

"You know, the walls in my cell are simply *drab* ."

Rarity nodded in understanding. "I know you like maroon."

The criminal threw her head back in an exasperated groan. "I didn't *see* anything, alright? Trixie's cell was further down from mine, so I was too far away to see anything." Glancing around, she lowered her voice. "I *did* , however, hear a stallion's voice. I didn't hear their entire conversation as the alarm was blaring loudly. But he *did* say something about 'destiny' and 'fulfilling a grander purpose.' Then he said something I couldn't make out. Something foreign. And today, at lunch, there was chatter amongst the inmates who had been closer to Trixie's cell."

"Did they say what he looked like? His hair? His eyes?"

"His physical description varied. You know how fragmented gossip can be. The only thing every pony agreed on was that the intruder had been dressed like a pharaoh."

Rarity blinked. "A pharaoh?"

The Mane-iac nodded, gesturing to her head. "Crown, anklets, fake beard, the whole shebang. They've already nicknamed him the Phony Pharaoh."

"Did they say anything else?" she asked excitedly.

Shaking her head, the Mane-iac replied, "Just that Trixie took one look at that Phony Pharaoh and followed him without question. Can't say I blame her, as he was offering her a Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free Card."

"Thank you, Dee," Rarity said, putting her hoof up to the glass. "You've helped me a great deal."

The Mane-iac glared at her hoof. "This doesn't mean I'll be going easy on you next time we meet."

Embarrassed, Rarity dropped her hoof. "We have an understanding then."

They both nodded, though Rarity could've sworn she saw her old friend's mouth turn up a millimeter.

"Miss Buttercream?" Mr. Fetlock said, opening the museum's front doors.

Fluttershy gasped when she saw the curator and started backing down the steps. "Oh, Mr. Fetlock! I'm so sorry, I know the museum's closed and I didn't mean to stare and—"

"How long have you been standing out here?"

"I…" She looked around. "I don't know, I was just…I'll go."

"No, no," Mr. Fetlock said, holding out his hoof. "Why don't you come in?"

"But," Fluttershy said in confusion, "you're closed."

"If you're so intent on visiting right now," he said with a smile, "I can give you a private tour. However, as we are still renovating, I must ask you not to touch anything."

Nodding, Fluttershy carefully took his hoof and he gently led her inside.

"Was there anything in particular you wanted to see today?" Fetlock said as he relocked the door.

"The sculpture gardens," Fluttershy murmured.

"Ah," he said sadly. "I'm afraid it is quite in…disarray."

"I know. I just…want to see them."

Bowing his head, he led her down the halls. "I haven't seen much of you recently."

"I was here yesterday," she said quietly.

"Yes, but you do not come as often as you used to. I am not surprised, as your favorite exhibit…came to life."

Fluttershy said nothing else until they arrived at the gardens. As Mr. Fetlock had said, it was in shambles. Her jaw dropped at the piles of rubble that were once beautiful statues.

"Yes," Mr. Fetlock said, his voice growing lower. "As you can see, those accursed Power Ponies have turned this gorgeous garden into ruins."

"Can't any of the statues be restored?" Fluttershy asked.

He sighed. "I have the Canterlot Restoration Society coming in a few days, but these sculptures may be beyond repair."

Her attention turned towards the center of the garden. "May I…have a moment alone?"

"By all means," Mr. Fetlock said with a bow. "Just don't touch anything!"

With a nod, she slowly made her way through the rubble, careful not to step on anything. She stopped in front of the place where Discord's statue used to stand. All that remained was a broken pedestal and a cracked plaque. After staring at the pedestal for a long moment, Fluttershy released a heavy sigh.

"I know you can't hear me," she muttered. "Now, more than ever. I mean you're not there anymore." She looked down at her hooves. "But…you *are* here. All the time. Not a day goes by when I don't think about you. Even…even when I'm with Delancey. Every time we go out, all I can think about is…how it would be if I were with *you* .

"And those last couple of nights…" Shutting her eyes, she sobbed softly. "Had you always been…so *nasty* ? So noncompliant? So…so *rude* ? I know you were evil and everything, but with how you acted when you were with me—the *real* me—you never once gave me the impression that you might be…"

She trailed off as tears streamed down her face. "And yet here I am, still talking to your statue, even after it's broken and gone." She looked back at the pedestal. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Am I interrupting something?"

Fluttershy squeaked and spun around, finding Fetlock suddenly behind her.

Looking past her, he said, "I know you always came to visit the statue of Discord, but I never realized how… *attached* you'd gotten to it."

Biting her lip, Fluttershy turned away from him. He took a step closer.

"Did you know I was here when he got out? The very first thing he did was ask where he might find his 'savior.' Where he might find *you* ."

Fluttershy sat down and wrapped her hooves around herself.

"I understand. After listening to your voice for so long, it was only natural that he'd grow to admire you."

She hung her head, desperate to get these feelings off her chest. "He…he took me to his realm…asked me to marry him…said he loved me more than anything and I…said no."

She could no longer hold back her tears as she buried her face in her hooves.

"Strange, isn't it?" Mr. Fetlock said, his eyes flashing as they kept their focus on her. "All that power, and he couldn't give you happiness." He stepped closer. "A mare like you deserves more than just a mere god who cannot keep his promises."

Fluttershy flinched as she suddenly felt his hoof on her shoulder.

"A mare like you deserves a *king* ," he whispered in her ear, causing her to shiver.

Too stunned to respond, Fluttershy was still as Mr. Fetlock gently cupped her chin and turned her face towards him.

"I've watched you come here ever since you were a foal," he said, his voice suddenly richer and deeper. "I've watched you grow into a delicate beauty. I've watched you admire my museum." His green eyes appeared to glow. "You find it as precious as I do."

Fluttershy's face grew red as she turned away, surprising the stallion.

"Thank you, Mr. Fetlock," she said, standing up, "for the compliment, but I'm afraid I can't…that is, I'm…I have a boyfriend."

As she started to walk away, he quickly grabbed her foreleg. "He doesn't appreciate you the way I do! No pony can!"

"I'm sorry," Fluttershy said, trying to sound bolder, "but I must go."

He growled as he tightened his grip. "How can you be resisting me?!"

"Mr. Fetlock, please! You're hurting me!"

She yelped as he pulled her back so close that their muzzles were touching.

"Look into my eyes," he hissed, pressing her closer, "and come with me, Hatshysut!"

"Who?" Fluttershy said, attempting to pull away.

Impatient, he gritted his teeth. "Look into my eyes!"

After much struggling, Fluttershy decided the best course of action was to kick him in the crotch.

"Sorry!" she cried once his grip had loosened.

Breaking out of his hold, she ran out of the gardens. Fetlock growled, his eyes glowing green as they glared after her.

"Help!" she shouted through the halls. "Some pony help!"

She searched for a security guard or a construction pony. The museum was closed but they still should have been there.

"Where *is* every pony?"

As she turned a corner, she almost collided into some pony.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed. "I didn't…" Then she got a better look at the pony. "Coco?"

She almost didn't recognize Coco Pommel, as she was decorated in golden bracelets and wearing a golden Anugyptian crown atop a black wig.

"Coco, we've been looking all over for you!" Fluttershy said. "Rarity's so worried! What's happened to you? Why are you dressed like that?"

But Coco only stared at her blankly.

"Coco?" the pegasus said, waving her hoof in front of Coco's empty eyes. "Are you alright? What's going—?"

She was cut off as something hard hit her on the back of the head. Her eyes rolled back into their sockets as she collapsed to the ground.

Before she lost consciousness, she heard hoofsteps coming

towards her her.

"I should've executed you long ago, Hatshysut," said what sounded like Mr. Fetlock's voice. "You always were the most resilient of the seven."

Well this arc is turning out longer than I expected...Mane-iac popped up after such a long time and insisted she get a Hannibal Lecter-type cameo (why do I always come back to that?).

Miss Dressmacher=play on "Miss Tessmacher" from the Superman movie

Hatshysut=Hatshepsut, a Queen of Egypt

The Pharaoh's Curse: Part 4

" *Be true to yourself, stay focused and stay you, take advice from other folks, use what you can, but never mind what is not for you. For the most part, trust yourself and believe in what you are doing."*

- Musiq Soulchild

One of the many rooms Twilight had constructed in the Power Ponies' Headquarters was a library. She was the only one who had ever used it until now. After hearing the Mane-iac's tip from Rarity, Rainbow decided to do what Twilight would do: research! Spike was upstairs searching the internet while Rainbow, Rarity and Pinkie Pie were sifting through books on Ancient Anugypt they found in the Headquarters library as well as some Pinkie had fetched from the public library.

Rarity looked up from her book for a moment at Pinkie Pie, who was sitting across the table, flipping through pages at super speed.

"What in the world are you doing?" Rarity asked.

"Speedreading!" Pinkie exclaimed, slamming the book closed. "Cool, huh?"

Rainbow yawned, anxious to find an excuse to look up from her own book. "Find anything on Amenhooftep?"

Pinkie shrugged. "Obsessed with jewels, obsessed with mares, nothing we didn't already hear at the exhibit yesterday."

"Same," Rainbow said. "I didn't even learn much else about his wives, not even their names, other than Neighfertiti. This is what happens to info after thousands of years."

"Do you really think the Phony Pharaoh who broke Trixie out was Amenhooftep?" Rarity asked.

"I don't see who else it could be. The curse says he will not rest until he's reunited with his seventh wife."

"So the mummy's alive?" Pinkie said. " *Cree* py!"

"He certainly didn't *look* like a mummy," Rarity said, "at least according to what the inmates told Dee. I think she would have mentioned him being wrapped in cloth or at least really, *really* decomposed."

"But Amenhooftep had his body preserved," Rainbow pointed out, "not fully mummified. What I *don't* get is how he's managed to kidnap five mares all by himself! I mean the guy was a king, not some criminal mastermind!"

Pinkie snorted. "Is there really a difference?"

"One doesn't necessarily need superpowers for kidnapping," Rarity said. "I mean I love Coco, but she's not the best at defending herself."

"What about Trixie though?" Rainbow said. "I mean it's easy for *us* to catch her, but some thousands-year-old mummy without superpowers? And how did he even convince the guards to let him in? Who lets a mummy into a prison?!" She slammed her head onto the table. "None of this makes any sense!"

"Maybe your boss'll know more about Amenhooftep," Pinkie suggested.

"He *is* an Anugyptian expert, plus he's supposedly descended from Amenhooftep and…" As Rainbow gasped, her head shot up. "Sweet Zeus! What time is it?!"

Rarity checked her phone. "A quarter to seven."

"Seven?!" She bolted into the air. "Dinner! I totally forgot! I gotta get going!"

"I thought you said this wasn't a date?"

"It isn't! But I still can't be late for a business dinner with my boss!

He's mad enough about the mess we made already!"

She was about to dash off when Rarity used her magic to grab her tail.

"You're not going in *that* , are you?" Rarity asked.

Rainbow looked down at her rainbow-patterned hoodie. "I don't have time to go home and change!"

"Not to worry!" Rarity quickly wrote something in her notepad, ripped out a page and handed it to Pinkie. "Go to my apartment and get me these things, stat!"

"On it!" Pinkie said, saluting before she zipped away.

She returned a second later with a pile of supplies. Rarity grinned as she levitated a tube of mascara into the air.

"Oh no!" Rainbow said, holding up her hooves as she backed away. "No, no, don't you dare—"

She yelped as Rarity tackled her and went to work at a speed that would rival Pinkie Pie, who zipped off a moment to get popcorn. When the cloud of dust cleared, Rainbow's mane was combed and tied into a single long ponytail. She looked down at the maroon dress that had appeared on her body. Its style was simple, with a modest neckline, no sleeves, and a few ruffles on the skirt. A small, rectangular, matching purse was slung over her shoulder.

Pushing her spectacles up her nose, Rainbow glared at the unicorn. "You are *not* gussying me up for a dinner with my boss!"

"I just did," Rarity said bluntly.

"It's *not* a date!"

"But it's still dinner with your employer, at an expensive restaurant, no less. Which is why I dressed you in something smart, formal, but modest enough not to give him the impression that you see him as anything other than an employer."

Rainbow scrutinized her gown, trying to find something to argue about. Knowing nothing about clothes, and thus finding no argument, she let out a sigh.

"Fine. Doesn't really matter what I wear anyway."

Rarity gasped dramatically. "You eat those words right now!"

Ignoring her, Rainbow clung to the strap of her purse. "At least I can use this dinner to learn more about Amenhooftep from Mr. Fetlock. You guys keep looking. I'll try not to be long. Maybe if I skip out on dessert…"

"No way!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Order dessert and bring it back for us!" She smiled sweetly. "I like anything with sugar."

Rainbow was practically panting by the time she reached the restaurant. She had to stop in the doorway to catch her breath. When she looked up, her breath went still.

The place was huge. For a busy restaurant, the floor was surprisingly sparkling clean. The walls were lined with marble pillars which held up gothic arches, framing Mountiterranean tapestries. Red silk hung from the ceiling and a palm tree stood in the center of the room. The servers all wore turbans and hijabs along with their black suits and bowties. The platters they carried looked to be solid gold.

"Rarity wasn't kidding," Rainbow murmured. "This place *is* fancy."

"Can I help you, miss?" asked the maître d', a green mare in a golden hijab.

Shaking out of her shock, Rainbow replied, "Err, yeah. I'm meeting my boss? A guy named Fetlock?"

"Ah, yes," the maître d' said, stepping out from behind her lectern. "Right this way, miss. Mr. Fetlock arrived not five minutes ago."

Checking the clock on the wall, Rainbow thought, *Shoot. Two*

minutes late. He's going to scream my head off!

The maître d' led her to a table in the back corner of the room.

"Ah, Miss Dash!" Mr. Fetlock said, rising from his seat. "You look positively radiant tonight."

Rainbow almost hadn't recognized her boss. She was used to seeing him in a suit, but the one he wore now was a *tuxedo* . A *white* one at that. His dark gray mane was in its usual ponytail, but appeared to be sleeker, as if he'd gelled it. On his chin was a small, but thick, goatee, and…was that eyeliner around his eyes?

As if his appearance wasn't surprising enough, he glided around the table and pulled out the other seat for Rainbow Dash.

"Um…thanks?" she said, slowly lowering herself into the chair.

"I hope you do not mind," Mr. Fetlock said, returning to his own seat, "but I took the liberty of ordering the wine." He gestured to the two full wine glasses on the table and the bottle between them. " *Rubis d'Anugypt* . Almost as delectable as what the pharaohs would have drunk."

As she blinked, Mr. Fetlock lifted his glass. "To us."

Rainbow wasn't a fan of wine, but not wanting to offend her boss, she too lifted her glass. "Uh…cheers?" He clinked his glass with hers and took a sip. "Wait. What do you mean by—?"

"Are you not thirsty?" Mr. Fetlock asked, looking at her expectantly.

Rolling her eyes, Rainbow took a quick sip and stopped herself from spitting it out. It tasted absolutely bitter, yet she sent her boss a grin.

"So, uh," she said, setting the glass down, "Mr. Fetlock—"

"Please, please," he said, holding up a hoof. "Let us spare the formalities. Call me…Felonious."

Scrunching her nose, she responded, "Felonious? What kind of name—?" Remembering she was talking to her boss, she quickly

composed herself. "Right. Okay, uh… *Felonious* ," she cringed as she said this, "I was hoping we could talk about the new mummy."

"Ah, yes!" Mr. Fetlock, or rather Felonious, said, his green eyes sparking with excitement. "Impressive, is he not?"

"Yeah, yeah, real impressive. I just had a few questions. You know, so I got all I need to know for visitors."

"Of course," he said, taking another sip of wine. "Ask away, my dear."

Dear? Rainbow shook it off so she could focus on her objective. "Yeah, so…that whole curse about him not finding rest until he's reunited with his wife, what do you suppose that means?"

Felonious stopped his drinking a moment and then slowly set the glass down. "I think it is rather simple. Amenhooftep's spirit will not be able to pass into the next world until he is with Neighfertiti again."

"Yeah, but…how does that even work? I mean Neighfertiti would've been mummified, right? So…wouldn't she already be in the next world?"

He looked to the side, his eyes holding a wistful, almost sad, gaze. "I am afraid it is not as simple as that. You see, there are things other than the body that tie spirits to the mortal world."

His eyes wandered in the direction of…Rainbow's chest. Looking down, she self-consciously covered her chest with her hooves.

What am I doing? This dress isn't revealing! And we walk around half-naked all the time!

"Uh, what," she said, lowering her hooves, "do you mean by that, exactly?"

Thankfully, his gaze moved to meet hers. "The spirit can be a… stubborn thing. Even when the body is gone it can still cling to the mortal world through some object or," his hoof clenched, "person."

"So…you're saying that Amenhooftep's spirit might be stubborn

enough to…make his half-mummified body move again?"

Felonious raised an eyebrow. "Why do you wish to know this?"

"No reason!" Rainbow said quickly. "Just…you know, thought it'd be a good ghost story for the foals at the museum."

"The museum," he said, hanging his head with a sigh. "My glorious palace of treasures…how will it ever be restored?"

"Right." She bit her lip guiltily. "H-Hey, accidents happen. I'm sure once Twilight gets back from her trip she can lend us some money and—"

"One cannot restore thousands of years of broken history with simple *money* ," Felonious said through his teeth. "Priceless artifacts were destroyed yesterday." His glaring eyes bore into hers. "All because of the carelessness of six overly-powered mares."

Rainbow gulped. "Uh…actually it was just four because Mare-velous and Matter-Horn were—"

"No matter!" His lips curled into an eerie smile. "I can rebuild my empire again."

Rainbow gasped as she suddenly felt his hoof over hers.

" *We* can rebuild *our* empire," he whispered, leaning forward.

Looking frantically between their touching hooves and her boss, Rainbow's thoughts were swimming. Mr. Fetlock wasn't acting like himself *at all* . With the formal attire, the gussying-up, the smooth tone of his voice, the refusal to use contractions…

She squeaked as she started to think that Rarity had been right all along.

Rainbow was on a date with her boss.

"Uh," she said, snatching her hoof away. "Look, err, boss…"

"Felonious," he said with a toothy grin.

"Whatever. You're a real…okay guy and all." She muttered, "Weird, but okay." She took a deep breath. "I'm just not into you."

She stiffened as he grabbed her hoof again.

"Feelings can change over time," Felonious whispered, not taking his eyes off her.

Shaking her head, she pulled her hoof out of his grasp. "You're my boss. It'd just be weird. Besides, I'm not even…" She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "It's, uh…kind of hard to explain, but…I don't feel that way about…"

Felonious' smile disappeared. "Don't tell me you're a…a…" his teeth ground together as he hissed, " *sapphist* !"

Rainbow blinked. "A what now?"

"You know," he said, his voice growing lower. "Like that…mare from Lesbos?"

It took a minute for her high school poetry class to catch up with her. As she recalled, a "sapphist" referred to the poet Sapphony, who had hailed from the Gracian island of Lesbos, the mare who had inspired the word…

"Oh!" Rainbow held up her hooves insistently. "No, no, no, *no* ! I'm not…I mean I'm not exactly straight either, but…I'm just not into any pony, really…"

Felonious huffed. "That is not a real thing."

She narrowed her eyes. "It is! In fact, there are lots of ponies who are…" She took a deep breath to calm herself down. "Forget it. This is exactly why I don't talk about it a lot. I just don't like you in that way, okay?" She began moving out of her chair. "I think I've lost my appetite."

Before she could lift her haunches, Felonious snatched up her hoof once more. This time, his grip was tight and Rainbow was unable to pry herself loose.

"You will not leave until I say so," Felonious growled.

"Let go!" Rainbow exclaimed, tugging harder as his grip tightened even more.

"Even in this form, you are headstrong," he said, his glaring eyes meeting hers, "Neighfertiti."

She paused. "What did you call me?"

"Is there a problem here?" the maître d' asked, coming up to the table.

Startled by her presence, Mr. Fetlock turned to the maître d', his grip loosening a bit.

"No problem," Rainbow said, yanking her hoof free. "I was just leaving."

Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she stomped out of the restaurant with her head held high. As soon as she was outside, she took to the skies.

"I'm such an idiot!" she cried. "Of *course* he thought it was a date!" She started mimicking his voice. "'Oh, asexuality isn't a real thing!'" She gagged. "What does *he* know? He's crazy! He called me Neighfertiti, for Zeus' sake! ' *Sapphist* !' Who even uses that word anymore? What does he think this is? The Fifth," she let out a yawn, "Dynasty…of…"

Suddenly, her vision became blurry, and she couldn't see where she was flying. Massaging her head, she let out a groggy groan.

How can I be sleepy? I slept in this morning. There's no way I could…

In the little consciousness she had left, she realized what had happened.

"The…wine…"

Her eyes rolled towards the back of her head as she plummeted to

the ground.

"I've got it!"

Rarity jumped awake as Pinkie Pie screamed excitedly.

"I've figured out why all those mares were taken!" Pinkie held up a book towards Rarity's face, showing a hieroglyphic image of Amenhooftep. "Remember Rainbow's speech at the museum? About Amenhooftep's seven wives?"

"Vaguely," Rarity said, gently pushing the book an inch away from her face.

"Well I do! The first wife was said to be snotty and conceited and would order every pony around like slaves!" She smirked at her friend. "Sound like some pony we know?"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Suri acts that way all the time."

"Uh-huh. And the second wife had been the first wife's servant girl. And Coco used to be Suri's assistant."

"So?"

"The third wife was intelligent and forward-thinking. I remember reading an article last week about Starlight Glimmer's 'Equal Work, Equal Pay' project where every pony in her company is paid the exact same salary, even the janitor!"

"While this is all very interesting, Pinkie, what does this have to do with—?"

"And the fourth wife had been the third wife's servant, and Starlight Glimmer's secretary disappears along with her!" She motioned her hoof in a circle. "See where I'm going with this?"

Rarity pondered for a moment and then her eyes widened in recollection. "The fifth wife…had been a high priest's daughter…"

Pinkie grinned, seeing that she was catching the pattern. "…caught stealing the king's treasure…"

"…and Trixie had tried to steal his treasure!"

"Ding, ding, ding!" She jumped onto the table to do a happy dance. "We have a winner!"

"Come to think of it," the unicorn said, rubbing her chin, " *all* the missing mares had been at the exhibit yesterday, including Trixie!"

"Right where the mummy could see them!" Pinkie's mouth twisted. "Hear them? Can he do that all wrapped up in toilet paper?"

"I think you're onto something, Pinkie." Standing up from her seat, Rarity began pacing the room. "If that Phony Pharaoh *is* Amenhooftep, he must be kidnapping mares who remind him of his former wives! And if he's already taken five…"

"Just two more to go!" Pinkie said, leaping down to her side.

"Then his next target must be Wife Number Six." She thought hard. "Oh, what did Rainbow say about Number Six?"

"Oh, she was this totally gorgeous village girl who was super shy and quiet and…"

Pinkie trailed off as she caught the terrified look on Rarity's face. Soon both their faces took on this expression as they reached the same conclusion.

"You don't think…?" Pinkie stared to say.

Rarity didn't *want* to think.

"Spike!" she practically screamed into her commlink, causing feedback.

" *Yow!* " Spike shouted at the same time as Pinkie. " *What you trying to do? Blow up my ear holes?!* "

"Sorry, Spikey, but this is an emergency!" Rarity exclaimed as she

headed for the elevator. "Do you have a location on Fluttershy? I haven't seen her in hours!"

"Oh, yeah, she left while Rainbow was yelling at the police on the phone," Pinkie said, racing ahead to press the elevator button. "Said there was something important she needed to do."

The unicorn gave her an exasperated look. "You couldn't have mentioned that she'd left *earlier* ?!"

"You didn't *notice* ?" She huffed. "And you call yourself a friend."

When the girls arrived in the control room, they found Spike looking at the monitors in confusion.

"That can't be right," he said, typing more commands on the keyboard. "Maybe it's a malfunction?"

"What's the matter?" Rarity asked.

Spike yelped when he finally noticed the pretty unicorn standing right next to him. His face flushed red.

"R-Rarity, I was…" He coughed. "I, uh…um…"

A sudden kick against the back of his chair jolted him out of his trance.

"Focus, Casanova!" Pinkie shouted, placing her hoof firmly on the top of the chair. "What's the twenty on Fluttershy?"

He blinked. "Huh?"

"Where *is* she?"

"Oh!" He pointed up to the screen, which had a map of Maretropolis. "Since that incident with Sombra when Twilight's commlink went offline, I placed trackers in all our suits. See?" He pointed to three blinking dots: one white, one pink and one green. "That's the three of us at Headquarters. This way, I can know where every pony is all the time. Even Applejack while she's in Appleloosa! And Twilight while she's in…"

When he looked at the girls, he found them glaring down at him in disapproval.

"You mean you put tracking devices on six totally gorgeous mares and didn't tell them about it?!" Pinkie snapped.

" *Really* , Spike!" Rarity said in a huff.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Spike said, holding up his claws defensively. "I only did it in case our commlinks ever went offline and one of us got kidnapped! And it's a good thing I did, because it looks like Fluttershy's *and* Dash's links are offline!"

"What?" Rarity said with a dramatic gasp.

"Maybe they were cleaning their ears out and forgot their comms were in there and accidentally crushed them with their cotton swabs," Pinkie said.

The other two raised their eyebrows at her.

"It happens," Pinkie said, twisting her hoof in her ear.

"Even if that were the case—which I doubt," Spike said, muttering that last part, "according to the map, Fluttershy and Rainbow are at the museum." He indicated the two blinking yellow and blue dots. "But I thought Rainbow would still be at the restaurant with her boss."

"The museum?" Rarity said. "I can understand if Rainbow went there to take care of business, but why would Fluttershy be there when it's closed?"

Pinkie gasped. "Because the museum curator has kidnapped them both!"

Rarity cocked her head. "You don't mean Mr. Fetlock?"

Spike turned his chair around to her. "That cranky old curator? I thought we were dealing with a mummy."

"Duh!" Pinkie said, conking Spike on the head. "The cranky old

curator *is* the mummy! Or rather he's possessed by the mummy what with the two of them being distant relatives and all and now the mummy is running around in the curator's body taking double revenge for the mummy's jilted-ness and the destruction to the museum by kidnapping all these mares who remind the mummy of his ex-wives most likely for some ritual to bring his most beloved wife back in a new living body which is why he needs Rainbow because she looks just like the drawings of Neighfertiti and we already know the curator has the hots for her so he used the dinner to seduce her to his secret ritual place at the museum and if we don't get there lickety-split we're gonna lose two of our friends to an ancient mummy blood ritual that could possibly end in death!"

The dragon and unicorn stared at her for several seconds, before the latter asked, "However did you come up with all that?"

Folding her hooves across her chest, Pinkie replied, "Despite what you all whisper under your breaths about me being bubble-brained, I actually pay attention!"

Spike shrugged. "Sounds legit."

"But if Pinkie's right," Rarity said, "we have to get there *now* !"

"So we just burst in there and fight all willy-nilly?" Pinkie asked.

"No, you remember how *that* worked out. We need a plan."

There was silence for a long while.

"Well?" Rarity said.

"Uh…" Pinkie rubbed the back of her neck. "I don't know if you've realized, but the ones who usually make the plans are either on vacation or being held hostage by a mummy-possessed curator."

"We can still come up with a plan!"

Silence again.

"Any pony?" Rarity looked between Spike and Pinkie. "Come on. Literally *any* ideas would be nice right about now!"

After a few more seconds of quiet, Pinkie piped up. "Marshmallow robots!"

"Ooh!" Spike said excitedly. "I'll write that in my gadget book!"

The unicorn groaned in exasperation. "I'm the only adult here, aren't I?"

"Guess that makes you the leader then!" Pinkie said, applauding.

"Woo-hoo!" Spike cheered. "Go Team Rarity!"

"Who cares who the leader is?!" Rarity shouted. "Good gracious, I'm surrounded by—"

She was cut off by the blaring of the General Badness Alarm.

"Oh, what *now* ?!"

They all looked up at the alert window on the screen.

"Bray's Jewelers is being robbed," Spike said nonchalantly.

"Not again!" Rarity exclaimed. "And at *literally* the worst possible time!"

"Why don't I just zip on over there and take out the robbers and then meet you at the museum?" Pinkie asked.

"That's…" The unicorn became more relaxed. "…not a bad idea, actually. Although if our mummy friend proves to be more of a threat than we've anticipated, it may not be wise for me to take him on by myself."

"Just sneak in and find Rainbow and Fluttershy," Spike said. "Once you've freed them, you should be able to take on any surprises the Phony Pharaoh throws at you."

"Hopefully I'll be done with the burglary before then," Pinkie said.

The dragon started typing again. "And I'll try hacking into the museums' security cameras to scout the perimeter, and to keep tabs

on you, Rarity." He blushed. "Not in a creepy way, I swear!"

"That's…brilliant." Rarity's awe was then momentarily replaced with frustration. "Where were these ideas five minutes ago?!"

When Fili-Second arrived at Bray's Jewelers a minute later, the alarms were still blaring. The first odd thing she noticed was that the glass windows and door hadn't been broken. When Fili-Second tried the doors, they were locked tight. She did a quick perimeter check but found no open windows, no unlocked back door, no open ventilation shaft, no other points of entry.

"Man, these guys are good. Well, not *that* good if they still set off the alarm." Glancing at the locked doors, she said, "Well," and backed quickly across the street, "here it goes."

Her back hooves spun wildly as she charged for the doors, leaning her head forward to serve as a battering ram. But half a millisecond before she could hit the doors, they flung open. Not having enough time to react, she crashed into the back of the shop, causing an explosion of diamond necklaces and sapphire bracelets.

"My, that was fast," said a familiar voice.

As she massaged her head, Fili-Second turned around to see Discord floating above her—along with several pieces of jewelry—wearing a black-and-white-striped shirt and a black ski mask.

"I'd only tripped the alarm but a few seconds a—" He then got a better look at the hero and frowned. "Ah, great. I was going for Miss Angry Pants, not Hermes 2.0."

"Discord?" Fili-Second said in confusion, springing to her hooves. "What are you doing robbing a jewelry store? Not judging or anything, but I thought the only jewelry you were into was your amulet."

"True," Discord said as he made the jewelry spin in circles. "The answer to your question is very simple." He smirked. "Because I *can* and it's *fun* !"

Fili-Second rolled her eyes. "Saddle Rager told me about your little bank heist yesterday. I didn't think you were *this* desperate for attention."

Discord gritted his teeth together. "I am *not* desperate for attention!"

"Oh, please! You could actually be trying to steal your *actual* necklace but instead you're stealing necklaces you have absolutely no use for because I doubt a god like you needs to steal since you can just conjure whatever you'd like out of thin air all just for the heck of it and to be honest I think you just get off on getting beaten up!"

Discord blinked. "What do you mean 'get off?'"

"Never mind," Fili-Second said. "I don't have time for this. Just snap your fingers or whatever you do to put everything back and we'll call it a night."

She tried dashing off when Discord caught her in a butterfly net.

"Seriously?" he said, lifting the net to his eyelevel. "Do *all* you heroes dash off from a crime scene before stopping the bad guy?"

She huffed as she writhed around in the net. "We only stop bad guys who are a *threat* ."

He gaped. "Are you saying I'm not a threat?! I ruled the world for twenty-seven and a half days! It took all twelve Olympian gods to take me down! I'm the biggest threat the mortal world's ever seen!" He gave it some thought. "Well, after—"

"Hate to break it to ya, buddy," Fili-Second said, crossing her hooves, "but since you broke out of your statue and kidnapped and proposed to our friend and then just let her go when she asked you nicely and then made no grand attempt to reclaim your amulet after several months, we almost forgot about you up until a few days ago."

" *Forgot* about me?!" Discord hollered, shaking the net.

"You have to admit your escape was pretty anticlimactic!" she said,

poking her head out of the top of the net. "We hadn't even had a chance to complete our potentially dangerous blood ritual for our epic rescue!"

"How dare you insult me?! If I had my amulet, I would turn you into a snail! Try speeding your way through *that* !"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She jumped out of the net. "Look, pal, I *really* don't have time for this."

"You *will* try and stop me! Even if you aren't the hero I was going for, we might as well finish what we—"

"I'm serious!" Fili-Second screamed at the top of her lungs. "We have an actual threatening threat going on across town right now and I need to be there! Some mummy creep has possessed the museum curator and kidnapped several mares including your waifu and we really need to rescue them!"

Discord blinked. "My *what* -fu?"

"Ugh!" She facehoofed herself. "I'm talking about Fluttershy!"

The floating jewelry dropped to the floor, the net disappeared, and Discord's red pupils shrunk to the size of dust specks.

"And if I'm not there soon," Fili-Second said, not paying attention to the sudden change in the atmosphere, "Mummy Creep's gonna sacrifice her along with five other mares to bring *his* waifu back to life!"

It took a while for the god to get the words out. "Someone…t-took… Fluttershy?"

"Yes! So stop feeling sorry for yourself and put all this stuff back! And stop robbing places for no reason! You're just wasting every pony's time!"

She whizzed out of the shop, leaving Discord dazed. His eyes narrowed and his teeth ground together.

"I'm going to tear that 'Mummy Creep' limb from limb and mount his

head on my wall!"

His fingers were raised and prepared to teleport, when a siren sounded and his claw was knocked forward by a golden staff. Spinning around, he found a blue stallion with a dark blue curly mane and purple eyes floating above him. On his head, beneath the blaring red siren, was a golden helmet with wings on either side to match his staff which had eagle wings and two snakes carved into it. His light blue mail carrier unicorn and burlap sack hanging off his shoulder clashed with his ancient accessories.

He was an earth pony, the only thing keeping him afloat being the wings on his ankles.

"Hermes," Discord said, glaring at the messenger god.

"Discord!" Hermes said chipperly. "You're looking well, for a guy who's been a statue for two millennia."

"Yes, well, while I'd love to play catch up, I have a Mummy Creep to punish."

"Not so fast," Hermes said, slapping Discord's paw with his staff. "I've got a message from Hera."

Discord rolled his eyes as the messenger god dug through his bag of letters. "Unless it's an apology for imprisoning me for two thousand years, I'm not interested."

"Actually," the stallion said, pulling out a red envelope, "it's a warning."

"Not to take over the world? Surely Hera knows I've not returned to my world-dominating endeavors." He muttered under his breath, "Yet."

"She knows," Hermes said, opening up the envelope. "And she congratulates you on your self-control. Not even Daddy Zeus keeps still for as long as you have." He snickered. "Maybe keeping you still for two millennia did you some good."

Discord's eyes narrowed further. "Just get to the message before I

toss you into the sun!"

"Alright, alright! Sheesh. *You* haven't changed much." As he unfolded the letter, Hermes cleared his throat and began to read:

" *Discord,*

" *As much as I understand the desire to rescue your Vassal, and punish the mortal who has abducted her—* "

"'Vassal?'" Discord asked in confusion. "Does she mean Fluttershy?"

Ignoring him, Hermes continued. " *I must remind you that doing so violates Olympian Code 345-7, which dictates that 'in the event of a less than divine threat on the mortal realm, the gods must refrain from intervening and leave the affair to the mortals. Demigods, godly Vassals and heroic mortals are free to settle the affair in whatever way they see fit* without *divine intervention.'* "

Discord stared at him blankly. "So what are you saying?"

"It's *saying* ," Hermes said, looking up at him, "that since the stallion who kidnapped your girl is a mortal, that makes this a mortal affair, and it is against the Olympian Code of Conduct for gods to meddle in mortal affairs."

Steam came out of the draconequus' ears. "But this scoundrel has the mare I love! I can't just do nothing! *You* may be retired, but *I* made no such commitment!"

"But you did. Over two thousand years ago, you signed the Olympian Code of Conduct and agreed to abide by our rules. Surely you remember what happened *last* time you broke them."

Discord winced as he recalled the time in stone. As much as he wanted to bend the rules, he did *not* want to go back there, especially if it meant not being able to see Fluttershy again.

Then he remembered something and opened his eyes. "You no longer have your symbols of power! You can't seal me in stone without them!"

"True," Hermes said with a shrug, "but as my Lady Hera's message says, *There are* other *ways to punish you if you go against the Code, especially since you yourself are without your symbol of power. For instance, Poseidon could really use some assistance ridding his waters of waste.* "

Discord cringed. He didn't know which was worse: becoming stone again or becoming the God of the Sea's personal garbage boy.

"I wouldn't worry about your girl," Hermes said. "She can take care of herself, and she has very powerful friends."

"That's true," Discord said, remembering how quickly Fili-Second had left. "You sure that pink one isn't related to you somehow?"

"No." Hermes tapped his chin. "At least, I don't think so. Hard to keep track of all my one-night stands." He noticed Discord's disapproving look. "Hey, not *all* of us can stay devoted to one mortal!" He murmured, "Just never thought *you* would."

"Then you wouldn't understand why I can't just sit around here while the mare I love is in danger!"

"Which brings me back to the message." Hermes continued to read. " *However, should the heroes succeed in rescuing your mare, since this stallion has offended you—though indirectly—by abducting a mortal you favor, Olympian Code 13-4 gives you the right to punish him in whatever way you see fit, except in death, as that is Hades' department. Other than that, no restrictions.*

" *Yours sincerely,*

" *Hera, Queen of the Gods.* "

Discord sighed in defeat. "Fine. I'll abide by *her royal highness'* rules. That Mummy Creep just better hope those heroes manage to kill him, because when I get to him," he grinned wickedly, "I'm going to do something much *worse* ."

Around the time Rarity and Pinkie were figuring out Amenhooftep's

plot, Rainbow was regaining consciousness. Her head throbbed and her vision blurred as she attempted to sit up.

"Ugh," she said, rubbing her temple. "Why does my head feel so heavy?"

Then her hoof brushed against something that caused a small rattling sound. After some feeling around, she realized they were beads dangling from her mane. As her hooves went up further, she discovered a ring-like crown at the top of her head.

When her vision finally cleared, she looked down at her body and was shocked to see that her evening dress had been exchanged for a kalasiris, an ancient Anugyptian robe! Now that she was able to see, she realized a certain ovular ring was absent from her sight. Putting her hoof to her muzzle confirmed that her glasses were gone.

Gasping, she felt for Zeus' Bolt and was both relieved and panicked to find it still safe around her neck. Relieved, because she hadn't lost it. Panicked, because it was out for the world to see.

And whoever had drugged her had removed her spectacles.

"At long last, Neighfertiti," said a low voice. "We are together again."

Rainbow Dash spun around as a figure stepped out of the shadows. He wore a pharaoh's headdress, necklace, anklets and beard, accessories which she recognized immediately.

"King Amenhooftep?" she said.

The pharaoh chuckled. "In a manner of speaking."

Then he stepped further into the light and Rainbow got a better look at his features, making her gasp.

"Boss?! *You're* the Phony Pharaoh?!"

He huffed angrily. "I refuse to abide by that horrid title bestowed upon me by the press. If I am to be titled as anything other than King Amenhooftep, let me be known from this day forward as…" He

broadened his shoulders and held his chin up proudly. "Pharaoh Phetlock!" He leaned forward to whisper, "With a 'p-h,' if that was not clear."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "And they say *I'm* bad with names."

"You need not fear me, Neighfertiti," Pharaoh Phetlock said as he circled her. "In but a few moments, you will be feeling like your old self again."

"Why do you keep calling me…?"

She trailed off as she started to take in her surroundings. She was in what used to be the Reneighssance gallery, only the paintings had been cleared out and replaced with a circle of six sarcophagi. Rainbow looked down, horrified to find herself also in a sarcophagus! She looked back at the surrounding coffins and saw each of the missing mares, sleeping, all in ancient Anugyptian garb! The occupant of the sixth sarcophagus made Rainbow's blood run cold.

"Fluttershy!" She flew out towards her friend. "What did you do to her?!"

"She is alive," Pharaoh Phetlock replied. "For now."

Rainbow turned to her employer, her eyes burning with rage. "Have you cracked, Boss? Is this because we—I mean the Power Ponies destroyed your museum? Why are you pretending to be a pharaoh? How did you even manage to kidnap all these mares?" She quickly covered her body with her hooves. "And did you change my clothes while I was unconscious?!"

The Pharaoh rolled his eyes and said patiently, "To answer your questions, in order: I have not 'cracked.' I have simply been awakened. But I will explain that later. Secondly, yes, a part of this *is* about what you and your," his teeth gritted together, "miscreant heroes did to my museum!"

Rainbow's hoof flew to her pendant, as if that would make him forget that was there.

"Oh, yes, *Zapp* , I know who you are." He took a deep breath. "Although, I must confess I did not know until I… *uncovered* your pendant. It did not truly surprise me, however, given your lineage."

"What the hay are you talking about?"

"One question at a time, please." He then began pacing the room. "As for why I have taken the role as Pharaoh, it is because of *him* ."

He pointed across the room to an eighth sarcophagus, which contained the mummy of Amenhooftep. The mummy's jewels were gone, of course, as they were now worn by Mr. Fetlock.

"Or rather *me* . It is a bit complicated. You see, Neighfertiti, one of the things about Amenhooftep that was left out of the history books was his ability to channel the powers of the gods. All pharaohs were said to have been descended from the gods, but few realized they could wield their power."

Chuckling darkly, he pointed to the cobra on his headdress. "But *I* did. Through the eyes of the Apophis, I was able to possess my descendant's body. Fear not, he is still within. I am mostly in control, but we do share common goals. Fetlock wishes for his precious treasures to be preserved, I wish for my treasure to be recovered."

"Apophis?" Rainbow said, trying to remember her Anugyptian mythology. "You mean the snake god? Enemy of the sun god, Ra? Didn't he try to hypnotize Ra or some—?" She then looked around at the sleeping mares. " *That's* how you got all these mares to come with you! You hypnotized them using the power of Apophis!"

Pharaoh Phetlock applauded. "I always admired your intelligence, Neighfertiti." He looked down at Fluttershy. "You and Hatshysut, however, were immune to my power," he smiled at Rainbow Dash, almost in admiration, "as I had expected, for you had *never* fallen victim to my wiles, not even thousands of years ago. Which is why I had drugged your drink as a precaution."

His eyes raked up and down her body. "And you need not worry too much about my removing your clothes. It is not as if we ponies need them."

"Fine," Rainbow said through her teeth. "Okay, now to my next question: why kidnap all of us? And, again, why the hell do ya keep calling me Neighfertiti?!"

He gave her a condescending look. "Really, Miss Dash, I would have thought you would have figured it out by now, even if you clearly do not have Neighfertiti's memories, as I do Amenhooftep's."

"Okay, seriously, this identity-crisis-third-person-self-reference thing you've got going here is getting old *really* fast!"

"Do you not remember the hieroglyphs? Do you not remember the rainbow-haired queen?" He gestured towards Zeus' Bolt. "Can you not feel Neighfertiti's soul within the pendant?"

She looked down at the bolt and then at him. "What does Zeus' Bolt have to do with…?" Then the image of Neighfertiti *did* come to mind. "Wait. Are you saying you think I'm some…reincarnation of Neighfertiti or something?"

He nodded and indicated the sarcophagi circle. "These mares represent the six wives I knew in life," he said, turning his eyes intently towards her, "before I at last found true love…with you."

Blinking, Rainbow stuck her tongue out and gagged. "Seriously. Just *once* , can't we have a villain who *doesn't* wanna get with one of us? Just *once* would be a nice change of pace!"

"But you were taken from me too soon," Pharaoh Phetlock said, advancing towards her, "and damned my soul to eternal loneliness!"

Rainbow tried backing away, but in doing so nearly tripped backward into Fluttershy's sarcophagus.

"Yet here we are again," he said, slowly raising his hoof up to her face, "though you have not yet awoken."

She slapped his hoof away, which made him angry, but he kept his cool.

"With the lifeforce from these six mares, we can return your soul to this world, and we will rule once again! It is only fair, as it was their

sacrifices that led me to meet you in the first place."

"Ya mean you're gonna sacrifice these girls in some sort of blood ritual?!" Rainbow exclaimed with a shiver. "Geez! Not even the Shadow King was *this* dark!"

"The ritual must be completed tonight," he said, pointing up at the glass ceiling, "while the full moon is at its zenith."

"Yeah," Rainbow said, rolling her eyes, "that's kind of a given."

"Come, my darling," Pharaoh Phetlock said, taking her hoof. "Lay back in the sarcophagus, so that we can begin."

"Uh," she said, yanking her hoof away, " *no* !"

He sighed heavily. "I thought you might be difficult."

Suddenly, five of the mares—all excluding Fluttershy—sprung up from their sarcophagi, their eyes staring blankly before them.

Pharaoh Phetlock smirked. "Darlings…"

The hypnotized mares' heads snapped towards the Pharaoh.

"Do what you can to keep Miss Dash all snug in her little bed."

Rainbow was prepared to break into a run when she was engulfed in light. The three unicorns—Starlight, Trixie and Sugar Belle—were working together to magically drag her towards the central sarcophagus. The pegasus kicked her legs in an attempt to break free, but it was pointless!

She was forced back into a coffin, and one of the unicorns—she couldn't tell who—summoned chains to hold her down. Rainbow twisted in her bounds as the face of her boss appeared smiling triumphantly above her.

"These mares cannot hold a candle to you," he said in a tone that *sounded* like it was trying to be complimentary, "but they are still useful." He looked in one of the mares' direction, though she couldn't tell whose. "Betrot is especially talented. It is a shame she

keeps it all hidden away."

Rainbow didn't have time to figure out which mare he was talking about. Judging by the position of the moon, the ritual could begin at any time!

Come on, Dash, think! What did Twilight do when she was held hostage by a power-crazed psycho totally obsessed with her?

Struck with inspiration, Rainbow put on a mask of despair.

"Oh, Mr. Fetlock—"

" *Pharaoh* Phetlock!" he snapped.

"Right." Rainbow kept her sorrowful—yet clearly over-the-top—tone. "Oh, great and powerful Pharaoh Phetlock! You are just no match for me! Looks like you've won, fair and square! There is just no way for me to beat you!"

He turned to her and grinned. "I am so glad you see it that way."

Her face fell. "Aren't you gonna let me go?"

"Why would I do that? As you have said, my love, I have won."

"No!" Rainbow said, trying in vain to sit up. "You're not supposed to agree with me! You're supposed to feel all guilty over some inferiority complex or something!"

"Silence!" the Pharaoh hissed, looking upwards at the moon. "It is time for the ritual to begin."

Closing his eyes, he spread his forelegs out over Rainbow's body and began chanting in Coptic. The pegasus gasped as her body started to glow. She was running out of time.

"Come on, Boss! You don't wanna do this!" she said hastily, taking another page out of Twilight's book. "I know you're still in there! Think of all the good times we had together! Like…like when we… uh…"

Her mind drew a blank. Apparently, her relationship with her boss was so professional, there were no particularly good times to think of. Except…

"When I'd forgotten my lunch and you gave me half your sandwich?"

The memory wasn't enough to break Mr. Fetlock out of his trance. Ignoring her, he continued chanting. She groaned in frustration as she thrashed her chained body about.

If I had Fluttershy's freaky madness-induced strength, I could just break outta here! Sadly I'm just mad *! If I had Pinkie's super speed, I could spin my tail into a buzz saw or something just as logic-defying! Rarity would use her bracelets, AJ would still be able to control her lasso, Twilight could just melt through these chains…*

"Anubis…" the Pharaoh said, the only recognizable word in his chant. "Neighfertiti…"

"I'm *not* Neighfertiti!"

As she shouted this, her train of thought ground to a halt. She stopped her thrashing and looked down towards her pendant. She couldn't really see it, but she could feel its warmth on her chest.

Wait a minute . She gazed up at the moon. *I'm* not *Neighfertiti. I'm not Twilight, I'm not AJ, I'm not Rarity, Pinkie, or Fluttershy.*

"I'm Rainbow Dash," she muttered. "I'm Zapp. I'm a Power Pony. I'm…"

Just then, Zeus' Lightning Bolt felt warmer as it lit up beneath the chains. Rainbow's eyes shot wide open as they glowed white.

Suddenly, she was in a hot desert, no longer chained up, but flying in the air. Down below was Pharaoh Phetlock, looking up at her from the balcony of a grand, white palace.

"Amenhooftep!" Rainbow shouted in a voice that was not her own. "Release Hatshyput! She does not belong to you! She loves another!"

Pharaoh Phetlock, or rather Amenhooftep, narrowed his eyes at her. "And who are you to be commanding the Pharaoh of Anugypt?!"

Rainbow clasped the bolt around her neck. "I am Neighfertiti, great-granddaughter of Io and Zeus, King of the Gracian Gods!" She held the bolt up for him to see. "Soldier of that same Zeus and wielder of his Lightning Bolt!"

Rainbow then snapped back to reality. She didn't have time to question how that vision had come to her, but it had helped her to reach an important realization.

"That's right!" she shouted, willing the bolt to glow brighter. "I *am* the Soldier of Zeus!"

Storm clouds began forming overhead, blocking out the moon, causing Pharaoh Phetlock to cease his chanting.

"And I'm gonna break outta here," Rainbow said with a smirk, " *my* way!"

Before she could think of the consequences, she willed lightning to strike at her chains. Instead of blasting her chains open, the lightning passed through the *metal* chains and down to the *wooden* sarcophagus, causing it to explode beneath her. Luckily, Zeus' Bolt made Rainbow resistant to electricity, but her clothes didn't have that trait.

When the smoke from the explosion cleared away, the sarcophagus was in shambles, Rainbow's clothes were singed, her mane stood straight up, and the chains remained intact.

"Right," she said, shaking from the shock. "Metal chains. Bad idea."

"Perhaps *I* can be of some assistance!" called Radiance's voice.

"Who's there?" Pharaoh Phetlock demanded as he looked frantically about for the source of the voice.

A pink buzz saw materialized above Rainbow. She shut her eyes as it whirred and cut through her chains.

"What kept ya?" Rainbow shouted.

"My beloveds!" the Pharaoh hollered. There was the sound of several mares standing up. "Find the intruder and stop her! And hurry! The moon will not be in position for long!"

There was a zipping sound followed by several fast punches and a light giggle. It was obvious that Fili-Second had arrived.

"What is going—ah!" the Pharaoh cried out as he was suddenly pulled backward.

Radiance's and Fili-Second's faces appeared smiling above Rainbow Dash.

"Apologies for being late, darling," Radiance said as she continued work on the chains.

"But Discord was going through some sort of mid-eternity crisis and was robbing a jewelry store for no reason other than—hold that thought," Fili-Second said before dashing off. "Take that, zombie brides! Wait so shouldn't it be *mummy* brides? But you're not bandaged up though we are dealing with a pharaoh here but you're all hypnotized like zombies or—"

Once the chains were broken, Rainbow shot up into the air and flexed her wings and legs. "Oh, yeah! Now we're talking!"

"So what's the plan, chief?" Fili-Second asked.

Rainbow glanced around. Pharaoh Phetlock was on the floor, recovering from whatever attack had been used on him. Fluttershy was still asleep and the rest of the sacrifices were circled around the three heroes, closing in, the unicorns' horns illuminating.

"Okay," Rainbow said, throwing her hooves around her colleagues' necks to bring them in closer. "Amenhooftep seems to be controlling Mr. Fetlock through the jewel-eyes in that crown. I think if we break the jewels, we'll break the spell."

"What about the zombie-mummy brides?" Fili-Second asked, pointing.

"You two hold 'em off while I go for the crown. Remember, they're all hypnotized and have no idea what they're doing, so try not to hurt 'em."

"Not even Trixie?"

Rainbow hesitated. "Don't hurt 'em… *badly* ."

"No promises," Radiance murmured, glancing at Suri.

"Alright! Power Ponies, go!"

After high-hoofing each other, the team split up. Radiance immediately headed for Suri.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time!"

Without hesitation, she summoned a pink boxing glove and in one swift punch, knocked her boss into unconsciousness.

"I do so hope you do not remember all this when you awake," Radiance said, adjusting her mask. "Either way, it's fortunate I'm wearing this."

She then created a cage to seal Suri in, just in case.

Meanwhile, Rainbow was creating a tiny storm cloud overhead as she approached the Pharaoh's crumpled figure.

"Okay," she murmured, clutching her pendant. "No beating around the bush this time. Time for the direct approach."

A bolt shot from the storm cloud towards Pharaoh Phetlock. But he jumped up and flew out of its path.

Wait. *Flew?!*

Rainbow gasped as she looked up at the Pharaoh, who now had enormous eagle wings growing out of his back.

"Wings of Horus!" he declared, swooping down towards her.

Flapping her own wings, she dashed out of his way.

"So ya got wings now," she said, hovering above him. "Big deal!"

Baring his teeth, which were now suddenly pointy, the Pharaoh lunged at Rainbow and, for a split second, they seemed to be in the desert. Remembering her training sessions with Applejack, Rainbow grabbed hold of his front hooves. The moment they made contact, they were back in the desert. The scene remained this way as she whirled him around and flung him across the sky.

Using his wings to steady himself, the Pharaoh turned back to her, wearing an angry, and somewhat amused, expression.

"You fight well, Neighfertiti," he said. "For a mare."

She willed the storm to fire more bolts at him. "I wish I could say the same for you, Pharaoh."

"What do you mean?" he asked, dodging the bolts.

"Oh, nothing. I was simply expecting," she chuckled as one bolt singed his tail, "more."

The scene returned back to the museum. Pharaoh Phetlock looked down at his burning tail and growled before springing at Rainbow again.

Meanwhile, Fili-Second had rounded up the rest of the hypnotized mares and locked them in Radiance's cage.

"You'd think the Phony Pharaoh would've picked minions who can actually *fight* ," Fili-Second said with a snort.

Starlight Glimmer then smirked as she powered her horn. With a might blast, the cage exploded. Radiance cried out as her bracelets suddenly became hot.

"How…?"

She was then instantly encased in ice, not unlike the Matter-Horn's. Radiance could only move her eyes around, and focused them on the pink unicorn approaching her.

"Hey!" Fili-Second cried. "You can't do that to my friend!"

She then picked up Trixie, pointed her horn forward and then charged towards the ice block. Trixie was so alarm that she started firing without thinking. One beam struck the ice block, freeing Radiance.

"That works," Fili-Second said, dropping Trixie like a broken toy.

"You fool!" Starlight exclaimed, turning to Trixie. "How is it possible that you were able to win the Pharaoh's heart when you can't even use magic properly?!"

With a harrumph, Trixie stood up. "Maybe because I didn't *think* so much!"

"Ha!" Starlight poked her in the chest. "You don't think *at all* !"

"My lady, please!" Sugar Belle said.

"And *you* !" She whirled around. "How could my husband have left me for *you* ?!"

"It wasn't my fault, my lady!" Sugar Belle shrank back under her gaze. "After all, I…wasn't the one he…caught with another stallion in bed."

With a furious cry, Starlight started shooting at Trixie and Sugar Belle, sending them running.

"You are so violent!" Coco Pommel shouted. "This is why he was married to me *longer* !"

She had to start running as Starlight fired at her too.

"Err, should we do something?" Radiance asked as she watched the mares go at each other.

Fili-Second shook her head as she started eating popcorn she'd gotten from the movie theater five blocks away. "This is *way* better than daytime drama!"

On the other side of the room, Rainbow and Pharaoh Phetlock were still going at each other with lightning strikes and magical green blasts—courtesy of Isis, he said.

"You cannot win, Neighfertiti," he said. "No matter how much you want to defeat me, you cannot bear to injure your employer!"

Rainbow paused to think on this. "Ya know something? This whole ordeal has made me realize one thing." With a shrug, she made the storm cloud bigger. "I don't care about my boss that much."

He blinked. "What?"

The biggest bolt yet shot from the cloud, striking the top of the Pharaoh's crown. He cried out in pain as the cobra's emerald eyes exploded into tiny pieces. The fighting mares suddenly stopped and dropped to the ground, unconscious.

"Aw," Fili-Second said, throwing her popcorn bag over her shoulder. "It was just getting good."

Once the smoke from the lightning had cleared, the stallion's body went limp. His eagle wings disintegrated and he started falling. Radiance caught him with a trampoline and gently lowered him to the floor. There was a soft moan over in one of the sarcophagi as Fluttershy finally stirred awake.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"We'll explain later," Rainbow said, panting from exhaustion as she landed at her side.

She looked around the room and found there were holes in the walls and floors from the various magical blasts. Then she looked down at her boss' breathing, but unconscious, body.

"I'm *so* gonna get fired for this," she murmured.

"So that's it?" Fili-Second asked. "We finally get a mummy fight and that was it?"

As she was saying this, green smoke was emitting from the emerald

shards and making its way towards Amenhooftep's sarcophagus.

"I think we all did splendidly," Radiance said. "And brilliant leadership by you, Zapp."

"Yeah," Rainbow said, rubbing the back of her neck. "I think once I realized I should stop thinking like Twilight and start thinking like me it was easy to—hey, did that mummy just move?"

They all turned to the sarcophagus leaning against the wall. The mummy inside was glowing green, and some of its bandages fell away to reveal two glowing green eyes. Its front hooves slowly unfolded from across its chest.

"What in the world?!" Radiance said.

"I thought you said you defeated the mummy!" Fluttershy shrieked.

"It wasn't the jewels controlling Fetlock!" Rainbow said with a gasp. "It was Amenhooftep himself!"

King Amenhooftep stretched out his hooves and slowly took a step forward.

"Don't worry, girls!" Fili-Second huffed. "Mummies are super slow! We can take him in—"

As she said this, an enormous misty green snake appeared out of nowhere, surprising them all. Before any pony could react, the snake wrapped itself around Radiance and Fili-Second.

"He must still be able to harness the powers of the Anugyptian gods!" Rainbow exclaimed. "Even like this!"

"Then why is he only coming alive *now* ?!" Fluttershy said, gripping Rainbow's foreleg in terror.

Noting how sluggishly he was approaching them, Rainbow said, "Obviously, he's not very agile. That's why he used Fetlock as a conduit."

"Well don't just stand there with all the anime-style exposition!" Fili-

Second hollered, struggling to escape the snake's coils. "Blast him already!"

Nodding, Rainbow touched her pendant. Then she yelped as it unexpectedly shocked her.

"What the…?" Then she trailed off as the bolt pulsed with light. "Whaddya mean don't hurt him?! Don't you know what this guy's capable of?!"

The others stared at her in confusion.

"Who are you talking to?" Fluttershy asked.

Ignoring her, Rainbow continued to yell at the pendant. "Let you take over? Whaddya mean by…?" Her angry expression turned into one of understanding. "O-Oh. Okay then, err, yeah. Take over or whatev —"

She suddenly stopped speaking as her eyes flashed yellow. Blinking, Rainbow looked at her surroundings. The giant snake was tightening around Radiance and Fili-Second and they were finding it difficult to breathe. The mummy growled as his eyes focused on them.

Just then, Rainbow broke away from Fluttershy and shouted, "Amen, stop!"

Every pony, including the mummy, turned to her. Her voice had boomed like a giant's, and the voice hadn't been her own. It sounded smoother, more mature. The mummy was frozen in place as she boldly walked towards him.

"This is not you, Amen," she said in a tone that was both commanding and pitying. "Stop this madness. This is not the way to find peace."

The mummy moaned, his lower jaw moving slowly as he struggled to speak. "Neigh…Neigh…"

Rainbow smiled softly. "Yes, Amen. It is I, your beloved." She moved her hoof tenderly to his bandaged face. "I am so sorry my

death caused you so much pain, but that is all over now. We are together again."

The glowing green eyes locked with hers, and the bandaged hooves gently fell onto her shoulders. The misty snake vanished and Radiance and Fili-Second collapsed to the floor, gasping for air.

"Our age of glory is over now, my love," Rainbow whispered. "It is time for us both to rest."

The mummy's green eyes faded and a transparent figure began rising from the bandaged body. The stallion resembled Felonious greatly. Another transparent figure emerged from Rainbow Dash's body, a mare who looked very much like her, only slightly older.

The two ghosts joined hooves and then rose up through the glass ceiling and into the sky. The mummy collapsed into a pile of bandage and dust.

Blinking, Rainbow rubbed her eyes and looked down at what was once the mummy.

"Uh," she said, glancing back at her stunned teammates. "What just happened?"

Discord, in his stallion disguise, practically broke the door down as he burst into Fluttershy's apartment. Fluttershy sat up from the couch she'd been lying on.

"Delancey?"

"Are you hurt?" Delancey said, grabbing her hoof and checking for injuries. "What did that pharaoh do to you?"

"I'm fine, I'm okay," Fluttershy said, taking his hoof to pat it. "Wait. How did you know about the Pharaoh?"

"I saw it on the news," he said, which was actually true as he had to be sure when the battle was over. "What happened? How is it that you were kidnapped?!"

After calming him down, Fluttershy explained the whole story, changing it slightly so that Rainbow and Zapp weren't the same person.

"The other mares who were kidnapped don't remember anything," she said. "The museum curator doesn't remember anything either, though he's in a mental hospital for observation."

Delancey heaved a heavy sigh as he embraced her. "I still can't believe you were abducted! How could I have let this happen?"

"It's not your fault," Fluttershy said, patting his back. "You couldn't have known."

I should *have* , he thought. *I should've been keeping my eye on you, making sure you were safe.*

"Though it's really sweet that you were worried about me," she said, giving his back a gentle rub.

After another sigh, Delancey pulled himself away. "Fluttershy, I haven't been entirely honest with you."

Confused, Fluttershy locked eyes with him. For a moment, he felt like telling her everything: his real identity, his cockamamie scheme to woo her, exactly what he planned to do once he got the Chaos Amulet.

But the innocence in her eyes were just too precious to tarnish by betrayal. He could not bear it.

So, he told a different truth.

"I've been, um…having feelings for another mare."

Fluttershy had not been expecting this. "W-What?"

"We didn't do anything, I swear!" he insisted. "In fact, she doesn't even know I like her. I mean we've…talked a few times but I didn't try anything, but…"

"You *wanted* to," she said simply.

Sighing, he nodded. "In fact, I was meeting with her when I heard you were kidnapped."

"I understand." Fluttershy's voice became quiet as she released him. "I mean…I suppose I can be a bit boring to be around with…"

"No, no, no, Fluttershy!" Delancey exclaimed, taking her hooves. "You can *never* be boring!" He bit his lip. "Although…I must admit, I…don't particularly like going to museums. I wasn't even fond of tea before I met you. But that's not your fault! I would do the dullest of things as long as I was with you! I would even watch paint dry!"

Fluttershy blinked. "Why would you watch paint dry?"

He shook his head. "I'm getting off track. The point is, Fluttershy, when I heard you'd been kidnapped, I…I hated myself for not being there for you. Not just physically but…emotionally. It…made me realize just how important you are to me and," he squeezed her hooves affectionately, "I couldn't live with myself if you got hurt."

Tears started welling up in Fluttershy's eyes. Any doubts she'd had about Delancey before were gone. How foolish had she been to think about Discord when she had a loyal, loving, and honest stallion right here in front of her! Throwing her hooves around Delancey, she hugged him tightly and he gleefully returned her embrace.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Feelings can't be helped, so I won't get mad at you for that. Thank you for being honest with me."

"I can assure you, Fluttershy," Delancey said contently, "that other mare is far from my mind right now."

"Who is it, anyway?" She blushed. "Not that I'm jealous. Just curious."

His eyes rolled back as he caught a whiff of her hair. "You know? I've quite forgotten."

They sat like that for a while. Then Fluttershy pulled back, a more serious look on her face.

"Do you really find museums boring?"

Delancey frowned. "Dreadfully so."

"Well, we could go somewhere else for our next date. Someplace you'd like."

"Let's see." He tapped his chin. "I've wanted to try this thing called laser tag…"

Fluttershy cringed. "It's not… *real* lasers, is it?"

"Oh no. It's all lights and fog, so no pony *actually* gets hit by lasers."

"So," she said, shifting her position on the couch so that she was sitting away from him, "I suppose you'd like us to do more… *exciting* things than Tuesday Tea."

"Well I wouldn't go *that* far. I've actually grown accustomed our Tuesday Teas. I enjoy our talks, and the tea's also not that bad. Although, perhaps if we—gah!"

He was cut off as a pillow contacted his face. Lowering the pillow magically, he looked at Fluttershy, who was smiling with feigned innocence.

"What was…?" he started to ask.

"Um," she said, looking down at her hooves. "Pillow fight?"

Delancey stared at her and then at the pillow. "So you just…hit others with…pillows?"

She nodded guiltily. "That way no pony gets hurt."

"I see." Smirking, Delancey levitated the pillow up to his eyelevel. "Safe."

He swung the pillow at Fluttershy, striking her in the shoulder, causing her to shriek.

"But *fun* ."

With a grin, Fluttershy grabbed another pillow from the couch and

prepared a vengeance strike. Delancey shoved his pillow in her face before she could swing. Laughing, she ripped the pillow from her face but then gasped when she saw a whole fleet of pillows floating above his head.

"Oh boy," she squeaked, both excited and scared for the battle to come.

The next day, Rainbow visited Felonious in his room at the Maretropolis Mental Hospital. It was less drab and guarded than Balkham, as the hospital was for non-violent patients. Since Felonious had no memory of his crimes, he was deemed safe enough for the hospital.

"They're only holding me for observation," he told Rainbow from his table, on which he was drawing something she couldn't make out yet. "The doctors say other than memory loss, my only problem mentally is stress, which isn't surprising, considering my job. I should be released within a few days."

"That's good," Rainbow said with a nod. "So…you don't remember… *anything* ?"

He shook his head. "Only flashes, but other than that, it's all a blur. However, I…" He looked up at her, his jaw clenched. "Miss Dash, if I…if I did anything to make you…uncomfortable, you should know that had I been in my right mind, I wouldn't have…"

"I know. Though…" She bit her lip. "Do you…that is, do you think I'm…?"

Felonious hung his head. "You are an attractive and intelligent young mare, Miss Dash."

"Yeah, I don't know about the second part." Rainbow faced him bravely. "But you should know, Boss, that power-crazed pharaoh or no, you just…aren't the guy for me."

"Understood." He raised his eyes towards her. "This will not affect your position at the museum, of course. I…hope we can still remain

professional."

He held out his hoof, but Rainbow cringed.

"Err, yeah, not exactly ready for physical contact yet."

"Fair enough," he murmured, dropping his hoof.

An awkward silence hung over them for a long while.

"Well!" Rainbow clapped her hooves together. "Hope ya get better!"

Then she dashed out before the situation could get weirder. Felonious was slightly crestfallen over the rejection, but thankfully, his attraction hadn't run deep enough to break his heart completely. At least in this, he knew he would be alright.

Content at this thought, Felonious returned to his drawing of King Amenhooftep and Neighfertiti holding hooves, golden wings on their backs.

"Eh, I've seen better hieroglyphs."

Yelping, Felonious spun around to discover that he was not alone in the room. Towering over him was the God of Chaos himself.

"You!" he cried, falling out of his chair.

"Hello again, Fetlock," Discord said, using his tail to pick the stallion up by his back hoof. "We don't know each other very well, but you made sure I was safe and untouched while I was at the museum, and I appreciate that."

He started twirling Felonious around slowly, making the stallion slightly dizzy.

"And I can respect your use of Apophis' powers," Discord continued. "That snake and I go way back. *However* …"

Ceasing his twirling, Discord brought the stallion up higher so their eyes would meet, and the draconequus glared at him furiously.

"What I *cannot* tolerate," he said with a growl, "is someone causing harm to a mare I care about very much! Unfortunately," he tapped Felonious' head with his claw, "since his majesty has checked out, I need to take my anger out on *someone* , even if you have no memory of it!"

The stallion whimpered as Discord tapped his chin in thought.

"Now, what exactly to do with you?"

He glanced at the picture of the pharaoh and his wife, and smiled wickedly.

"You know? I think I'll take a little inspiration from that pharaoh's curse."

Springing his claw out, he clutched the stallion's skull, digging his talons deep into the skin. Felonious cried out in pain.

"From this day forth," Discord said, his voice echoing throughout the room, "you will no longer believe yourself to be Felonious Fetlock, but *Pharaoh* Phetlock, and be as you were while possessed by King Amenhooftep." He whispered, "Minus the lusting after mares part, as I don't want you going after my beloved again." He thought for a moment. "And no channeling the power of the gods. That would be more of a *blessing* than a curse."

The pupils in Felonious' eyes shrank.

"You will instead lust after treasure," Discord continued. "Anything glittering and golden, you will desire. And your desire will never be fulfilled! From this, you shall suffer until the end of time!"

Just then, Hermes materialized beside him.

"WHAT?!" Discord boomed.

Frightened, Hermes handed him a letter and then poofed away. After quickly looking over the message, the draconequus groaned.

" *Fine!* " He turned back to Felonious. "Since I'm apparently *required* to allow you a chance to break this curse, you will never be satisfied

until…um…oh, I don't know! When you find true love or something! Cliché, I know, but I really *hate* coming up with antidotes."

Felonious shivered as his body glowed yellow.

"So is the will of the God of Chaos!" Discord exclaimed, dropping him to the floor. "Have a nice day!"

And so, he vanished from the room. Felonious groaned as the golden aura faded from his body. Rubbing his head, he slowly rose from the floor. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was his drawing. Taking it in his hooves, he stared at the couple and how happy they were to be together in the afterlife.

Then he ripped it to shreds, his eyes glowing green as he chuckled darkly.

This was a difficult chapter to write. I think I just didn't plan out the character arcs well enough to get to this part. And I was also trying to finish "Daughter of Discord" and start my new podcast "Beauties and Beasts" (listen to it now in PodBean).

The premise was pretty much based on an episode of "Miraculous Ladybug," though I tried to make the villain's anguish more justified (plus that show got it wrong: King Tut was NOT married to Nefertiti!). Hermes' design was based on Disney's (though made the sunglasses his actual eye color).

Don't worry. Zapp's connection to Neighfertiti will be explained further in another arc.

Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

Just a transitional chapter, so you know what Twilight and Applejack had been doing while the others battled Pharaoh Phetlock.

" *When your values are clear to you, making decisions becomes easier."*

- Roy E. Disney

The minute the elevator doors shut, Twilight let out the air she'd been holding in. She looked around hastily for listening devices or hidden cameras that were not her own. She had the sneaking suspicion that she was being observed. By whom, she had a pretty good idea. After all, how else could Sunset have known everything about her and her colleagues?

There was no way of knowing when or if she was spying on her. Perhaps some time away would confuse Sunset enough to shake her off her scent. Plus, it would provide some opportunity for Twilight to think about her current situation with her friend.

Thinking it was safe, Twilight summoned a blonde wig and a pair of shades.

Bon-Bon had been instructed to arrive two blocks down from Power Pony Headquarters in a rental car rather than the usual limo. She had also traded the uniform for some civilian clothing. As Twilight rounded the corner, she raised an eyebrow at the hot pink bug parked on the curb. She was about to pass over it when the passenger door popped open thanks to Bon-Bon's hoof.

"I thought the point of getting a rental was not to draw too much attention," Twilight whispered as she slid into the seat.

Giving a shrug, Bon-Bon replied, "In training, we learned that sometimes, the best way not to arouse suspicion is to be so totally obvious. Trust me." She put the gear into drive. "No pony will think to look for you in here."

Just in case, however, Bon-Bon took the long way to the train station, glancing in the mirrors to ensure they weren't being tailed.

Once they reached the train station, Bon-Bon leaned over and surprised Twilight with a kiss on the cheek.

"Just part of the act," Bon-Bon whispered. "Don't tell Lyra."

Nodding in understanding, Twilight opened the door and went to fetch her large mountain pack from the trunk. Once it was hauled onto her back, she sent Bon-Bon off with a friendly wave.

Alright , Twilight thought as she walked up to the platform. *Now all I have to do is take the train to Canterlot, get off two stops early, take the train to Dodge Junction, get off three stops early, take the B Train for five minutes and then take a stagecoach to the docks, pretend to get on a ship but sneak off before it launches and then hike up the mountains. Simple!*

Meanwhile, in Appleloosa, Applejack was bucking apple trees on Sweet Apple Acres, the family farm. Her sister Apple Bloom had a bucket on her head, running around to catch the falling apples.

"Ha!" Apple Bloom cried, setting down the apple-filed bucket. "Twelve apples in one!"

"Great catchin', sis!" Applejack said with a chuckle.

The filly raced to hug her. "I've missed havin' ya here, big sis. Chores just aren't as much fun without ya."

Smiling, Applejack patted her on the head. "I've missed this too. Not just the work, but hangin' around with ya."

"Bet there isn't a single apple tree in Maretropolis, huh?" Apple

Bloom said, bouncing to the next tree.

Applejack shook her head.

"What in the world do ya do with your time if not workin' the farm?!"

"Well, ya know," Applejack said, examining the tree trunk for the weakest spot. "There are all the varmint and rascals to round up."

"Ya mean Longhorn," Apple Bloom said, hoisting an empty bucket onto her head.

"Aw, he was pretty quiet compared to all the thugs who'd like to keep us crimefighters busy." Chuckling, she moved into her bucking position. "Why, every week or so I'd be stoppin' this thievin' gang of Diamond Dogs who'd spend their nights muggin' civilians and robbin' jewelry stores." She flexed her back hooves. "They were never really much of a threat, but they'd sure give me a workout. This one time, they were tryin' to steal—"

"Ya gonna buck the tree or what?" Apple Bloom demanded.

"Oh, right."

Applejack kicked the trunk, but not with as much enthusiasm as before. Only three apples fell, which made Apple Bloom pout in disappointment.

"And then there was Trixie," Applejack said, kicking the tree again, "this wannabe magician who always had some crazy cockamamie scheme to do who knows what for whatever reason. Would ya believe she tried turnin' all of Maretropolis into dogs, and then ice cream? Why? I have no id—"

"C'mon, sis! You're barely tappin' the thing!"

Turning back, Applejack saw her back leg lightly touching the trunk.

"Oh," she said, this time using both legs to kick hard.

Unfortunately, it was so hard, it sent a storm of falling apples. Apple Bloom yelped as she struggled to keep up. She was in such a hurry

she didn't notice the apple on the ground in front of her. Tripping over it, she fell to the ground, spilling the contents of her bucket across the grass. She glared at Applejack, who chuckled guiltily.

The next day, Applejack and her sister went into town to run some errands, their strong brother Big Mac pulling a cart of apples to be delivered. Ponies waved at the siblings, hollering things like:

"Welcome back, AJ!"

"All three Apple siblings together again!"

"Don't ya leave us again, Applejack! We missed ya too much!"

Applejack responded with a smile and a tip of her hat. For a brief moment, she felt the weight of Demeter's Lasso coiled inside. It'd been so long since she'd used it, she'd almost forgotten it was up there.

"See, big sis?" Apple Bloom said. "Every pony here's missed ya."

Applejack nodded. "Is it just me, or is this town a lot…quieter than I remember?"

Big Mac looked around at the wide, near-empty street and watched as a tumbleweed rolled by. "Eeyup."

"Probably cuz it ain't as crowded as them city streets," Apple Bloom said.

Catching sight of the sheriff's station across the way, she noticed the doorposts were surprisingly bare.

"No reward posters?" Applejack murmured.

Her sister shrugged. "Crime's been down since Cousin Braeburn became the new deputy."

"Braeburn?"

"Didn't I tell ya? Not long after ya left, Braeburn stopped these thugs who were holdin' up Sheriff Silverstar. He's been the sheriff's deputy ever since."

Applejack thought back on when she and her cousin would play together in the orchard as foals. He'd been a clumsy colt, often tripping over tree roots or falling into the pig sty. And he'd been really talkative, hardly ever letting Applejack get a word into their conversations. It was a little difficult picturing him as a crimefighter.

"Cousin Applejack!" cried an excited male voice.

"Speak of the devil," Applejack murmured, turning towards the sheriff station.

A yellow stallion with golden hair and green eyes burst through the swinging doors, an elated grin on his face. He tackled Applejack in a hug, causing her to laugh.

"They'd told me ya were back in town," he said rapidly. "When did ya get back? Why didn't ya call me? How rude that you were in town all this time and ya didn't look your old cousin up!"

As he rambled on, Applejack got a better look at him. He wore his usual brown Stetson and vest, only now he had a golden deputy star badge pinned to the latter. Apple Bloom hadn't been kidding.

"Nice new badge ya got there," Applejack said.

"What, this?" Braeburn said, polishing the star with his hoof. "Oh, yeah. Don't suppose ya heard how I stopped those thugs holdin' up the sheriff."

"I was just tellin' her!" Apple Bloom exclaimed.

"It was nothing. Actually, it was you who inspired me, Cousin Applejack."

"Me?" Applejack asked.

"Uh-huh. See, I was always kinda jealous that you got the family lasso after Uncle Bright Mac died, but I still had my old rope and

well, I just lassoed it around the thugs and there they were, all tied up! Next thing I know, I'm a deputy!"

"By the looks of things," Applejack said, glancing back at the bare doorposts, "you're doin' a bang-up job."

"Well," Braeburn said with a shrug, " *some pony* had to keep an eye on things while you were gone. So, ya back for good or ya just visitin'?"

Before Applejack could answer, Apple Bloom piped up and said, "My sis ain't goin' nowhere!"

The mare looked down at her sister in shock. "Apple Bloom, I—"

"Oh, good!" Braeburn said cheerfully. "It'd be fun if the two of us could work together as a crimefightin' duo. I mean I know Mistress Mare-velous likes to work alone and all, but since we're family, I thought we could…"

Applejack tuned him out the moment he said "work alone." She glanced down at her hooves, which still held the golden apple anklets which contained her costume. She had told herself she wouldn't use her powers on this visit—a break was long overdue—but she couldn't help but keep her rope and costume close, just in case trouble broke loose.

The anklets also made her think of Rarity and Twilight, and how clever they'd been to make their costumes more portable.

A distressed cry interrupted her thoughts and Braeburn's ramblings.

"Stop, thief!"

The cry came from an old stallion, who lay crumpled on the ground. A tall stallion in a black mask was running away from him, carrying a sack that must've belonged to the old stallion. Applejack shook her head.

"That's just the lowest of the low."

Just as she brushed her hoof over one of her anklets, Braeburn

bolted after the thief. As he ran, he reached back for the rope hanging from his belt and tossed it into his mouth. Curious, Applejack watched as he effortless spun the rope into a lasso and threw it towards the thief, catching him into the loop.

The thief cried out as the rope tightened around his stomach, forcing him to stop and release the sack. Braeburn slid on the dirt road and caught the sack on his back before it could hit the ground.

Every pony in the street cheered.

"Hooray for Deputy Braeburn!"

"Ya got him good!"

"Don't need to worry with Deputy Braeburn around!"

Braeburn looked back at his cousins, specifically Applejack, and sent them a wink.

"Wasn't Cousin Braeburn great?!" Apple Bloom said, applauding.

Applejack was unsure of how to answer. She felt a buzzing on her head and put her hoof up to her hat.

"Don't get jealous, Bessie," she whispered. "Some pony needed to keep this town safe while we were away."

"Ain't it great?" Apple Bloom asked. "Now ya don't need to worry about no bad guys while you're here! You can just relax!"

Applejack smiled a bit. "Yeah. Relax."

But Bessie was still buzzing inside her hat. Applejack couldn't tell if it was just her imagination or her rope was really upset.

Or maybe she was just looking for an excuse to use it.

With all the travel stops and precautions Twilight had taken, a trip that should have taken three hours ended up taking two days. When

she finally got to the mountains, she hiked it up halfway before making camp for the night. She put a protection spell around the camp, a smaller version of the one around Power Pony Headquarters, just in case any wildlife—or wild *lifeforms* —should visit her in the night.

When morning came, Twilight had a bag of trail mix for breakfast, packed her tent up, and continued uphill. Every now and then, she would glance behind her shoulder and up into the skies, and even stop a moment to listen for signs of movement. At one point, she heard a rustle in the bushes, but it turned out to be a rabbit.

At last, she arrived at her destination.

Using her magic, Twilight gently brushed the shrubs aside to reveal a clearing containing an ancient stone structure. There were six broken stone pillars, surrounding a circular stone pedestal. Twilight took a deep breath as a wave of nostalgia passed over her. She hadn't been to Pone Henge since she was fourteen. Walking up to one of the pillars, she traced her hooves over the ancient runes she'd spent hours trying to decipher with no luck. Even now, after further years of studying, she could not make them out.

Removing her knapsack, she trotted up to the pedestal in the center, stepped up and sat down. Closing her eyes, she inhaled, held her breath, and then slowly released it as she began to meditate. She could imagine what Mistress Mare-velous would say if she could see her now:

Seriously? Ya hopped three trains, hailed a stagecoach, skipped a boat and hiked all the way up here just so you could sit and think *?*

"Yes, Mare-velous," Twilight murmured with a contented sigh. "Yes, I did."

The next morning, Applejack and Apple Bloom were in the kitchen, washing the breakfast dishes. Apple Bloom was as chipper as ever, while Applejack was still contemplating yesterday's events.

"Braeburn's pretty…good," Applejack finally said.

"Yup!" Apple Bloom said, handing Applejack a wet plate for her to dry. "Ya see the way he caught that thief?"

Nodding, Applejack absentmindedly wiped the plate with the cloth. "He wonders if he and I could team up."

"Yeah, but I don't see why." The filly dipped a bowl in the soapy water. "He's been handlin' things pretty good here."

"Yeah," the older mare said quietly, still drying the same plate. "He… doesn't seem to need any help."

"But that's good, right? This means you've got nothin' to worry about! Instead of fightin' bad guys, ya can just relax here on the farm!"

Applejack paused in her drying and touched her hat. "Ya mean… hang up Ole Bessie?"

"Well, let's face it." Apple Bloom shrugged. "Ya can't fight bad guys forever. Don't ya ever get tired of it? Besides, Longhorn's locked up."

Glancing at her anklet, Applejack replied, "W-What about Maretropolis?"

Apple Bloom waved her hoof. "They got five other heroes. Plus that dragon sidekick. They ain't gonna miss ya. Ya said so yourself you were only in Maretropolis for Longhorn, and now you're home, and ya don't have to worry about catchin' that crook!"

Applejack looked down at her sister. She was so excited as she talked about this. Oh, how Applejack dreaded the idea of bursting this sweet little filly's bubble.

"Apple Bloom, you should know—"

Just then, Applejack's cell erupted at the kitchen table. She recognized the upbeat ringtone immediately. As she reached for it, Apple Bloom gave her a disapproving look.

"Ya said ya weren't gonna check in," she grumbled. "That ya wanted your team to figure things out for themselves."

"It's Pinkie," Applejack said, picking up the cell. "She probably just wants to say hi."

"Pinkie…" Apple Bloom's mouth puckered as she tried to recall the name. "She's the one who's got that superspeed, right?"

Applejack looked at her in surprise. "I don't recall tellin' ya everyone's identities."

Apple Bloom shrugged. "Just guessed. I mean with both of 'em bein' pink and hyper and all."

She couldn't argue with that.

After sending her sister a quick smile, Applejack went into the next room and picked up the call.

"Pinkie?" she asked worriedly. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

On the other end, Pinkie snorted. " *Nothing's wrong! Oh, well except this supposedly undead mummy broke into Balkham and sprung Trixie out and most possibly kidnapped four other mares and Zapp's the leader now that Matter-Horn's out of town, but it's nothing we can't handle!"*

"What?" Applejack said, shaking her head. "Undead mummy? Zapp the leader? And whaddya mean the Matter-Horn's outta town?!"

" *Oh, yeah. Twilight needed some space or self-reflection or something so she left Zapp in charge and after we destroyed half the museum—* "

She nearly dropped the phone. "I'm on my way!"

" *No, no, no! You're on vacation! Just relax, have fun with the folks! We're researching the mummy and Spike's doing hacking stuff on his computer and we'll have the bad guy in no time!* " Pinkie's tone became assuring. " *Seriously, AJ. We've got this.* "

Applejack was about to protest more when she remembered past events: when Rarity was captured by the Mane-iac and used her smarts to let the others know where she was, when Zapp and Fili-Second took on the Shadow King, when Fluttershy had faced Discord alone, and Spike's help in the Longhorn case. It took a few deep breaths, but Applejack finally calmed down.

"Right. You're right. I trust y'all. But seriously, if y'all need any help, I'll be on the first train to Maretropolis."

" *Thanks, but like I said, we've got this. Oh! The reason I called is that the flour shipment came in today.* "

Applejack blinked, and then slapped her forehead. "Aw, I completely forgot! Did it all come in alright?"

" *Yup. All fifty crates. Where do you want me to put 'em?* "

"The cellar should be fine for now. We'll be sure to keep one or two crates in the kitchen, in case we have a rush and need to work quickly."

Pinkie huffed. " *As if ya need to do that to work* quickly *. Or did you forget I can just carry the crates up and down in a millisecond?* "

A smile tugged at Applejack's lips. "Right. Still, I might need flour quickly and you might be too busy with customers. Ya can't exactly use your superspeed without 'em noticin'."

" *Fair point. Oh, I've come up with a new idea for a menu item! I thought of it when trying to think of a name for the bakery and thought it would be better as a pastry! It's called…Apple Berry Pie!* "

Applejack frowned. "Pinkie, there ain't no such thing as an apple berry."

" *Of course not, silly!* " Pinkie giggled. " *It's an apple pie with berries added to the mix!* "

"Oh. What kind of berries?"

" *That's the beauty part of it! It'll be a surprise! A different berry every*

time! The first pie may have strawberries, the next pie may have blueberries, or boysenberries, or snozzberries! "

Applejack had no idea what a snozzberry was, but the idea intrigued her. "I like it. Though ya may wanna check with the customers if they have any allergies, *before* ya bake 'em a mystery berry pie."

" *Check. I'll even have some samples ready for ya when ya get home. When* are *you coming home, by the way?* "

The question was innocent, merely one for information. However, it made Applejack's blood run cold. Firstly, because Pinkie had called Maretropolis "home," the same way Apple Bloom had called Appleloosa. Technically, Applejack still lived in Maretropolis, as she hadn't moved out of her apartment. Not to mention she'd bought a business there.

Secondly, she did not have the answer to the question.

" *AJ?* " Pinkie said, bringing her out of her thoughts. " *You* are *coming home? Right?"*

"Y-Yeah," Applejack said. "N-Not sure when yet, I mean…there's my sister and all and…soon, Pinkie. Real soon."

The sound of something shattering caused Applejack to spin around. Apple Bloom stood in the doorway, remnants of a plate scattered at her hooves. Her eyes were wide with shock and hurt.

"I'll call ya back, Pinks," Applejack said, hanging up. "Apple Bloom —"

"You're leavin' again?" Apple Bloom said, her voice cracking.

She knelt down to the filly, careful not to kneel on the shards. "Sis, we both know I can't—"

"Ya said you were comin' home…that you were stayin'."

Applejack shook her head. "I never said I was stayin' for good."

Tears welled up in her little sister's eyes. "But Longhorn…ya said

once ya got him—"

"Just cuz I beat Longhorn doesn't mean I'm not Mistress Mare-velous anymore." Lifting her hat, she took out the rope. "Demeter's Lasso is still my responsibility. My team, they—"

"They can manage without ya!" Apple Bloom snapped.

Though taken aback at her outburst, Applejack patiently continued. "It's not just fightin' crime. I've built a life in Maretropolis. I've got a roommate, I've got a business partner I'm startin' a baker with, I've got…friends."

As soon as the word left her lips, she knew it was true. The Power Ponies had become more than coworkers, or simple backup. They'd been through so much together, from Fluttershy's rampage, to the Mane-iac's plot, the Sirens' deadly song, to her final takedown of Longhorn. She would've gone down a lonelier, perhaps much darker, path had it not been for her friends.

"They need me, sis," Applejack murmured. "And I need them."

" *We* need ya!" Apple Bloom shouted. "Don't ya care about us?! Don't ya care if we care if ya end up like Ma and Pa?!"

Applejack stiffened. "What?"

"They did all that hero stuff, which would've been well and good if they hadn't gotten killed and left me without a ma and pa! And now," she sniffed, "you're gonna leave me too!"

Turning on her back hoof, she dashed out of the kitchen.

"Apple Bloom!"

She was prepared to run after her, but then remembered the broken plate in front of her. It delayed her long enough for her to realize that her sister needed a little time to cool down. With a heavy sigh, Applejack fetched a broom and began sweeping up the shards, all the while thinking of what she was going to say to her sister.

Twilight hadn't moved from her spot in a little over twenty-four hours. She had used her magic to get replenishment from her knapsack, but other than that, she hardly moved a muscle. She just sat there, eyes closed, breath going in and out. The quiet sounds of the forest, the rustling of the leaves and the blowing of the grass, helped her to relax into her deepest thoughts.

As the sun was setting, Twilight's ear twitched upon hearing a new sound. It was soft, and barely made a crunch, but it was unmistakably the sound of hoofsteps. Powering her horn and pretending to get water from her knapsack, she waited for the intruder to make themselves known.

At the sound of another horn powering, Twilight sprung to her hooves and spun around as she quickly put up a shield. She was met with two surprises. One, no spell was fired at her.

Two, she knew her intruder all too well.

"Come on, Twilie, I was just messing with you," Sunset said, chuckling as she diminished her horn. "Like I'd really be a poor sport and knock you down when you're vulnerable. I just wanted to see how much you were paying attention."

Still not removing the shield, Twilight stared at her in bewilderment. "How did you know I was—?" She shook her head. "You know what? Never mind. I don't want to know."

Sunset glanced around the ruins. "Ah, Pone Henge. I have such fond memories of this place."

Scowling, Twilight put down the shield and returned to her sitting position. "Look, Sunset, I'm not really in the mood to fight right now. In fact, I came out here to get away from all the fighting."

"You mean get away from *me* ."

Twilight closed her eyes and refused to answer.

With a tsk, Sunset shook her head. "Honestly, Twi, if you were trying to get away from me, you shouldn't have come to a place that holds such significance to us." She eyed Twilight's frozen back. "You *do*

remember that night, don't you? We were fourteen, Princess Celestia had taken our class up here on a field trip?"

She took a step forward. Twilight didn't even flinch.

"We camped but a few miles from here, and were going to see Pone Henge at sunrise." She chuckled. "Oh, but we were such impatient, curious fillies back then, and couldn't wait that long. So, once all our classmates were asleep, we snuck out of our tent and hiked the rest of the way up the mountain until we came to Pone Henge.

"We spent hours trying to decipher these runes, trying to solve the mystery behind this place." Sunset looked fondly up at the darkening sky. "When we finally gave up, we just lay here, side by side as we took turns pointing out constellations."

She glanced back at Twilight, who still hadn't budged. Sunset heaved a heavy sigh.

"I know you hate me. The things I've done are…unforgivable." She shivered at the memory of their last kiss. "I'm not asking for forgiveness, and I'm not asking for reformation. All I'm asking is that we just forget that we're enemies for a moment and…pretend we're still friends."

She waited for an answer.

"I don't wanna fight either, Twi. Not here." She hung her head. "*Never* here."

There was another long period of silence. Then Twilight sighed wearily as she patted the spot behind her. Grinning, Sunset sat down so that they were back to back.

"So why *did* you come here, of all places?" Sunset asked.

Without turning to look at her, Twilight quietly replied, "It seemed like a good place to think."

"About…?"

"A lot of things."

Sunset nodded. "Our relationship is a bit complicated."

"Not just that," Twilight said, opening her eyes. "So much has been going on with the team."

"Right. Your lasso friend had to face a moral dilemma while taking on her greatest enemy."

Twilight groaned. "Once again, not going to ask how you know that."

"I just read it in the paper," Sunset said with a shrug. "And I kind of gathered some time ago that Mare-velous' revenge plans weren't exactly…clean."

Twilight hung her head. "So did I."

Sunset turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "And you didn't even try to stop her?"

"It wasn't my business. Though I figured if Spike tagged along—"

"Yes." Sunset's tone became slightly angry. "Because *that's* the best solution. Sending a *child* to stop a grown mare from murder."

"It worked, didn't it?" Twilight snapped.

Sunset huffed. "You have a lousy team, you know that?"

This time, the lavender unicorn *did* turn around. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on, you know it. That's why you're out here, isn't it? We came out here together, because that's the kind of friends we were: the ones who share and do everything together, no matter how dark our secrets nor how questionable our actions."

"And yet you didn't tell me your *darkest* secret about your obsession with me."

"That's not the point. *You* shared *everything* with me. But with your team, it's different. You didn't even tell them you practiced dark magic until I came along."

"I told Mare-velous," Twilight murmured.

"Oh, yes, but she keeps secrets too. She didn't tell you about Fluttershy's *real* connection with the God of Chaos, *or* what she intended to do with Longhorn. The former you learned by accident, and the latter you concluded yourself. She didn't actually *trust* you with any of that information. *No* one in your team trusts each other. Neither of your teammates even trusted you with their identities."

Twilight opened her mouth to protest.

"Yes, I know you figured it out! The same way *I* figured things out! *You* didn't trust that any of your teammates would reveal their secrets to you in their own time, so you went and dug up everything you could on them, just like I did! The only difference between you and me, Twi, is that *I* actually acknowledge that the things I do are *wrong* !"

Twilight was fuming, clenching her hooves as she tried not to scream.

"That incident with Longhorn was the final blow, wasn't it? You finally realized how little your teammates trust you, and why should they? When you don't trust anyone but—"

"You're right!" Twilight exploded. "You're right, okay?! I have trust issues! I admit it!" She took a deep breath. "Can you really blame me though? After what happened to you?"

Surprised, Sunset turned to see Twilight's drooping form.

"Like you said, we shared everything," the lavender unicorn murmured, her head sinking further. "We shared our darkest secrets…and talents. You…you cared about me so much that you… you sacrificed your freedom to help me. And…you trusted that I would help you in return." She shut her eyes. "I can't…I can't let anyone else trust me that much again. Not even…"

She trailed off, unable to continue.

"Not even Spike?"

Twilight sniffed. "He probably knows almost as much about me as you do, but…I never told him…about what we did that night…before you were arrested."

Sunset nodded. "To be fair, though, he's not exactly old enough to know about that stuff."

Twilight couldn't help but chuckle a bit. "I still could've let him know…we weren't exactly just friends. At least…not that night."

"That's the one thing I can't figure out about you, Twi. Why you can't admit that at some point, you didn't think of me as a friend. Are you afraid of being a lesbian? Or bi at least? That can't be it. Your family's not exactly homophobic, and at least one of your friends is non-hetero. And it's not like the public will outcast you, as society's come so far—"

"It's not that," Twilight whispered. "I'm not afraid that I might be gay." She lifted her head to look out into the woods. "I'm afraid…that I might be… *not* gay."

Sunset narrowed her eyes at her in confusion. "You've lost me."

With a heavy sigh, Twilight shifted her body so that she could lie back and look at the sky. Sunset did the same thing.

"That night we…" Heat rose to Twilight's cheeks. "That had been—"

"Your first time?" Sunset asked. "I know. You didn't exactly date anyone before—"

"It wasn't just my first time. It was also the first time I…" Twilight paused. "See, I never really thought about that sort of thing about… any pony, before, but…that night I…I actually… *wanted* it." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Because it was you."

Sunset lay still, unsure of how to respond.

"I hardly ever think about it. Except when I was with you and—"

"Flash?"

Twilight's face grew redder.

"I know. Best you don't ask how."

Twilight shook her head. "I *did* want it. Maybe…maybe not as much as I…did with you, but…I just felt so close to Flash that night that I… it was the same way I felt close that night with you, and…that other night. It was just the one time with him, by the way."

She paused. "Truth is I just don't know *what* I am. I want it sometimes, but not *all* the time. At least…not as much as I think you're supposed to. And if I'm really gay or bi, then why is it the only ponies I've ever been attracted to are you and Flash? What does that make me?"

Sunset took a moment to come up with an answer. "It makes you a person. I mean…who's to say you need to find every pony attractive? After all, you're the only pony I've ever thought about in that way. Why should it be weird if you've only ever liked two?"

Twilight shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not saying a pony should sleep with a lot of ponies, but…they're supposed to *want* to, right? The thought hadn't even crossed my mind until we—"

"I'm an expert on a lot of things, Twi," Sunset said bluntly, "but not sexuality. The only thing I *do* know is that I didn't exactly choose to be attracted to you." She shifted awkwardly. "Maybe I, uh…chose the way I handled it, but…falling for you in the first place hadn't been my choice. We never choose who we fall in love with. So, if the only ponies you've ever been attracted to in the slightest are just one mare and one stallion, who's to say that was your choice?"

Twilight gazed at the stars as she thought about this. "Why couldn't we have stayed friends, Sunset?"

Sunset sighed. "We crossed too many lines since then." She sat up to look down at her. "You know? This is really something you should talk about with your teammates."

Twilight made eye contact with her. "Why? This doesn't affect the team in any way."

"They're still your friends, Twilie. If anything, they're the ponies you have to rely on in life-threatening situations. If you can't even rely on them with your emotional problems, how can you rely on them to assist you in battle? Besides, Speedy and Weather Girl would probably know about this stuff better than I would."

Twilight scrunched her muzzle in confusion. She understood why Pinkie might be helpful, but why would Rainbow Dash?

Sunset seemed to read her mind. "Just talk to her. You'll get what I mean."

"Maybe," Twilight said. "But…it's not exactly something I'm ready to talk about yet. I couldn't even tell *you* back in school."

"Fair enough." Sunset shrugged as she lay back down.

Twilight twiddled her hooves. "I'm glad you're here, Sunset, but… you do realize once we're back in Maretropolis, I can't ignore the fact that you're still a wanted thief?"

Sunset smirked. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't."

They both knew this moment was only temporary, that they would go back to being sworn enemies the next day. But for now, they weren't enemies, or lovers. They were just two mares lying beneath the stars.

"Hey, look." Twilight pointed up at the sky. "Orion's out tonight."

"Apple Bloom?" Applejack called, knocking on her sister's locked door for what felt like the thousandth time. "Ya hungry? We're havin' breakfast for dinner."

Her only response was a sniff.

"Apple Bloom, I'm sorry! Can ya please open the door so we can talk about this?"

"Go away!" Apple Bloom shouted from inside.

There was a thump against the door, most likely a pillow she had thrown. Sighing heavily, Applejack trotted away from the door and downstairs to the kitchen. Granny Smith and Big Mac were at the table with a stack of pancakes. They looked at the young mare questioningly, and she responded with a shake of her head.

"I didn't mean to upset her," Applejack said, taking her seat.

"Give her time, honey," Granny Smith said, passing the pancake platter to her. "How many?"

"No thanks, Granny," Applejack said, holding up her hoof. "I've kinda lost my appetite too."

Shrugging, the elderly mare handed the platter to her grandson. He silently scooped two pancakes onto his plate.

"Ya know we don't blame ya for wantin' to go," Granny Smith said as she served herself. "You're a grown mare. All birds have to leave the nest at some point."

"Eeyup," Big Mac said, squirting syrup onto his pancakes.

"I'm not so sure if I wanna go, Granny," Applejack said. "The reason I accepted Demeter's Lasso was so I could get my revenge on Longhorn. Now that he's put away, I…I'm not sure what to do next."

"Well, maybe he'll break out and give ya purpose again."

At this thought, Applejack slumped her head onto the table. "Did I do the right thing, Granny? Lettin' him live? I mean I know I couldn't've done it in front of his daughter, but…he *is* a murderer. And what if he gets out again and hurts some pony else?"

She raised her head a little to settle her chin on the table's edge. "And what if he doesn't get out? Do I keep bein' a hero? I mean… Apple Bloom's right. There are six other heroes to defend Maretropolis, and Appleloosa doesn't need me with Braeburn around. I've been doin' this for twelve years. Maybe…maybe it's time I…hang up Ole Bessie."

The rope buzzed under her hat, as if to say no.

"I mean…I *can't* keep doin' this forever, right? You said so yourself Grandpa retired a few years before he died. But…I'm not sure if I wanna quit yet. I…I've *liked* bein' part of a team. Plus, there's the bakery Pinkie and I are gonna start, but then again, I don't exactly have to be a hero to do that either. But I also don't wanna upset Apple Bloom and…"

She sighed. "What do I do, Granny?"

Granny Smith had said nothing during her granddaughter's speech, only listened. Once she was finished, the elderly mare rubbed her chin in thought.

"Do ya know why your ma took the gun?"

Applejack blinked, for this wasn't the answer she'd expected. "N-No, actually."

"Well," Granny said, cutting into her pancakes, "she didn't tell ya, cuz you were too young, but when she was just a filly, not much older than you were, she lost her ma."

Applejack raised her head further. She knew her maternal grandmother had died before she was born, but she'd never heard the details.

"What happened?"

Granny took a bit of her food. "Shot. By sheep rustlers."

Applejack's eyes widened.

"The rustlers were scared off by the law, but one of 'em, not the one who'd shot your other granny, had dropped their pistol. Lil' Buttercup picked it up and kept it until she was old enough to learn how to use it."

"But…why? I mean if a gun killed her ma, why would she use one herself?"

Granny shrugged. "It's like the old phrase: 'fight fire with fire.' Only it wasn't just your granny's killer Buttercup had a grudge against. It

was *all* creatures who bore arms. But she didn't wanna get in trouble with the law, so she put on a mask and became Kitty Coltson, fastest gun in the West!

"As she hunted that no-good sheep rustlin' killer, she shot every gun-owner she encountered on the way, regardless of whether or not they were usin' those guns illegally." She saw the horrified look on her granddaughter's face. "Don't worry. Your ma didn't have it in her heart to kill. None of the wounds she gave 'em were fatal."

Granny's face became grim. "She would shoot for the hooves, to make sure they'd never wield their weapons again."

Big Mac put down his fork, deciding he wasn't hungry anymore.

"Did…Ma ever find the rustler who shot her ma?" Applejack asked.

Granny Smith nodded. "She wasn't gonna show him the same mercy as the others. She had her gun pointed at his heart. But then…"

She paused to take another bite of her pancake.

"What, what?!" both grandchildren asked in anticipation.

She swallowed. "Your pa burst in. Bright Mac had been trackin' the same rustler. He and your ma had had a few run-ins before, your pa with the intention of bringin' her in. He wouldn't let your ma take a life, but knew not even Ole Bessie would be faster than her trigger hoof. He talked her down, told her that this wasn't the way, that he knew how she felt, as he'd lost a parent too. Ya know, mushy stuff like that.

"Well, it was enough to convince Buttercup not to aim at the heart. Instead, she shot his hooves and took his gun for her own."

Granny turned to Applejack. "So ya see, hon, you're not the first pony who's had to face their inner demons, and ya won't be the last."

"Dang," Applejack said after a long period of silence.

"You should know, with that hoodlum permanently handicapped, he had an awful hard time tryin' to get back in the crime spree. He didn't hurt nobody again, and your ma didn't have to stoop to his level to be sure of that."

"Because Pa stopped her," Applejack murmured, "just like Spike had stopped me."

Her heart swelled at this thought, and she found she suddenly missed the little dragon and his big heart. Indeed, he and the girls had definitely become more than just teammates.

"Even if I go back to Maretropolis though," Applejack said, "would it be as Mistress Mare-velous or just…Applejack Smith?"

"Your parents asked themselves the same question," Granny said, turning towards Big Mac. "When you were born, your parents decided there was somethin' in their lives more important than fightin' crime. They wanted to protect the innocent, they wanted to protect *you* .

"Your ma was the first to retire. She got rid of her guns, knowing she couldn't have those with a new foal around, had 'em destroyed, so that no pony else could get their hooves on 'em and take another life."

She turned to Applejack. "Your pa didn't hang up Ole Bessie until you came along. He decided if their family was growin', both of 'em needed to be there. Even if they managed to keep both their double-lives goin', they knew what might happen if either of 'em got hurt. They didn't wanna leave ya alone."

Granny Smith hung her head. "Then Longhorn came into town. He wanted to buy up the land by force, our farm included." Her tone became one of disgust. "He even threatened you three, even though Apple Bloom was just an infant. Your parents had no choice but to take up their masks and weapons again." She was quiet for a moment. "And y'all know where that led."

The table was silent as the siblings took this information in.

"Your parents made difficult choices," Granny said. "Whether or not they were always the right choices…well, we can't be too sure. But ya know?" She took Applejack's hoof. "Considerin' they did all they could to protect you, I don't think they could've done any of it differently."

Sniffing, Applejack wiped away the tears in her eyes.

"Whatever you decide, Applejack," Granny said, glancing at Big Mac, "we'll still love ya. And we'll always be here for ya. Right, Big Mac?"

Sniffing, he replied with a choked, "E-Eeyup."

When morning came, Apple Bloom heard knocking on her door once again. Her stomach growled at the thought that it might be the call to breakfast. Giving into her hunger, the filly rolled out of bed and trudged to the door with her head down. When she opened it, her sister stood in the doorway, suitcases at her hooves.

"So," Apple Bloom said with a sniff, "you're leavin', then."

Applejack studied her sister's tear-streaked face. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. She looked more tired than angry.

"I've got a job to do," Applejack replied softly.

Apple Bloom nodded. "Ya always were about doin' the right thing."

"It's not just that." She knelt down and laid a hoof on her sister's shoulder. "Listen, Sugar Cube. I love ya, and I've loved spendin' time with ya. I haven't felt this relaxed in a long time. This place is my home."

"But…" the filly said, meeting her eyes.

The older mare sighed. "Maretropolis is my home too. The Power Ponies aren't just my teammates, or my friends. They're like family. And that doesn't mean you're any less my family than they are. Maybe they don't need me as much as you do, but…I need *them* .

They've helped me fight my demons, they've helped me grow into a better hero, a better *pony* .

"And besides," she said, placing her other hoof on Apple Bloom's other shoulder, "I didn't just become Mistress Mare-velous so I could get revenge. I did it because of *you* ."

Apple Bloom blinked. "Me?"

She nodded. "I couldn't let what happened to Ma and Pa happen to you. I had to make the world a better place for you to live in, for *all* foals like you to live in. And how can I do that if I'm just stayin' on the farm?

"You're right. I can't be Mistress Mare-velous forever, and someday, I'll be ready to hang up Ole Bessie, but…not now. Ya get what I'm sayin'?"

Apple Bloom stared at her for a long while. Then, as more tears came, she threw her hooves around her big sister and sobbed into her shoulder.

"Promise you'll come back?" she croaked. "Even if just for a visit?"

"Of course, Sugar," Applejack said, smiling as she hugged her back. "You're my little sister. I'll always come back to you."

At the Maretropolis Museum, the construction workers were still working on rebuilding the broken exhibits.

"Hey, lady!" one of the workers called to Rainbow Dash. "Where do ya want this Venus statue?"

"One," Rainbow said, pushing her glasses up her nose, "that's a Gracian statue, so it's Aphrodite, not Venus. Two, uh…I suppose you could put it over…"

"Ma'am!" another worker called. "This roof's no good! We'll have to take it down and rebuild it from scratch!"

"Take it down?! How long will that—?"

"Miss, where do you want this jar?"

"It's an amphora and it goes—"

"Lady, when's the boss coming back?"

"I don't know!" Rainbow hollered. "Maybe never! Apparently he thinks he's a pharaoh again and has klepto…klepto…"

"Kleptomania?" asked a voice from behind.

Spinning around, Rainbow gasped when she saw Twilight Sparkle.

"Oh, thank Zeus!" the pegasus cried, nearly knocking the unicorn over with her hug. "I was starting to think you weren't ever coming back!"

"Nope," Twilight said with a smile. "I'm back. By the way, Rainbow Dash, can I talk to you about something…personal?"

"Personal?" Rainbow said, pulling back in confusion. "Uh, sure, I guess. Just do me one favor."

"What's that?"

Rainbow groaned in exasperation. "Never leave me in charge again, okay?"

Twilight giggled. "No problem. Oh, that reminds me. Since Mr. Fetlock is unwell, we're going to need a new head curator. You up for the job?"

Rainbow stared at her for a long while, her eyes wide in shock. Then she fainted.

Pinkie was bustling throughout her soon-to-be bakery, carrying crates of ingredients up and down the stairs to the cellar. She panted and wiped the sweat off the brow. Despite having

superspeed, she lacked in super strength, and those crates were *heavy* !

Slowly, she made her way to the next crate and hoisted it onto her back. Her knees struggled to keep it up.

Then, suddenly, the weight felt lighter. Confused, Pinkie looked to see Applejack holding up the crate alongside her. Gasping, she threw her hooves around Applejack.

"You're back, you're back! Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

"Pinkie!" Applejack shouted, as the sudden impact of the hug caused them both to lose their balance.

They fell to the floor, as did the crate. It burst open, causing flour to explode everywhere. Applejack narrowed her eyes at Pinkie, who smiled guiltily. Then, seeing she was covered in flour, licked the substance off her own face.

"At least we know the flour's good!" Pinkie said with a snort.

The image and comment were both so ridiculous, Applejack couldn't help but laugh along with her.

"Ready to start a bakery, Pinkie?"

Pinkie squealed. "You bet!"

If you've read my shorter fic "I Am Not Gay," you probably already know my theories for each of the Mane 6's sexual and romantic orientations.